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MADONNA MARY.

BY

MRS. OLIPHANT,

AUTHOR OF

"THE LIFE OF EDWARD IRVING,"

"AGNES," ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

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CHAPTER I.

MAJOR OCHTERLONY had been very fidgety after the coming in of the mail. He was very often so, as all his friends were aware, and nobody so much as Mary, his wife, who was herself, on ordinary occasions, of an admirable composure. But the arrival of the mail, which is so welcome an event at an Indian station, and which generally affected the Major very mildly, had produced a singular impression upon him on this special occasion. He was not a man who possessed a large correspondence in his own person; he had reached middle life, and had nobody particular belonging to him, except his wife and his little children, who were as yet too young to have been sent "home;" and consequently there was nobody to receive letters from, except a few married brothers and sisters, who don't count, as everybody knows. That kind of formally affectionate

correspondence is not generally exciting, and even Major Ochterlony supported it with composure. But as for the mail which arrived on the 15th of April, 1838, its effect was different. He went out and in so often, that Mary got very little good of her letters, which were from her young sister and her old aunt, and were naturally overflowing with all kinds of pleasant gossip and domestic information. The present writer has so imperfect an idea of what an Indian bungalow is like, that it would be impossible for her to convey a clear idea to the reader, who probably knows much better about it. But yet it was in an Indian bungalow that Mrs. Ochterlony was seated—in the dim hot atmosphere, out of which the sun was carefully excluded, but in which, nevertheless, the inmates simmered softly with the patience of people who cannot help it, and who are used to their martyrdom. She sat still, and did her best to make out the pleasant babble in the letters, which seemed to take sound to itself as she read, and to break into a sweet confusion of kind voices, and rustling leaves, and running water, such as, she knew, had filled the little rustic drawing-room in which the letters were written. The sister was very young, and the aunt was old, and all the experience of the world possessed by the two together, might have

gone into Mary's thimble, which she kept playing with upon her finger as she read. But though she knew twenty times better than they did, the soft old lady's gentle counsel, and the audacious girl's advice and censure, were sweet to Mary, who smiled many a time at their simplicity, and yet took the good of it in a way that was peculiar to her. She read, and she smiled in her reading, and felt the fresh English air blow about her, and the leaves rustling—if it had not been for the Major, who went and came like a ghost, and let everything fall that he touched, and hunted every innocent beetle or lizard that had come in to see how things were going on; for he was one of those men who have a great, almost womanish objection to reptiles and insects, which is a sentiment much misplaced in India. He fidgeted so much, indeed, as to disturb even his wife's accustomed nerves at last.

"Is there anything wrong—has anything happened?" she asked, folding up her letter, and laying it down in her open work-basket. Her anxiety was not profound, for she was accustomed to the Major's "ways," but still she saw it was necessary for his comfort to utter what was on his mind.

"When you have read your letters I want to speak to you," he said. "What do your people

mean by sending you such heaps of letters? I thought you would never be done. Well, Mary, this is what it is—there's nothing wrong with the children, or anybody belonging to us, thank God; but it's very nearly as bad, and I am at my wit's end. Old Sommerville's dead."

"Old Sommerville!" said Mrs. Ochterlony. This time she was utterly perplexed and at a loss. She could read easily enough the anxiety which filled her husband's handsome, restless face; but, then, so small a matter put *him* out of his ordinary! And she could not for her life remember who old Sommerville was.

"I daresay *you* don't recollect him," said the Major, in an aggrieved tone. "It is very odd how everything has gone wrong with us since that false start. It is an awful shame, when a set of old fogies put young people in such a position—all for nothing, too," Major Ochterlony added: "for after we were actually married, everybody came round. It is an awful shame!"

"If I was a suspicious woman," said Mary, with a smile, "I should think it was our marriage that you called a false start and an awful shame."

"And so it is, my love: so it is," said the innocent soldier, his face growing more and

more cloudy. As for his wife being a suspicious woman, or the possible existence of any delicacy on her part about his words, the Major knew better than that. The truth was that he might have given utterance to sentiments of the most atrocious description on that point, sentiments which would have broken the heart and blighted the existence, so to speak, of any sensitive young woman, without producing the slightest effect upon Mary, or upon himself, to whom Mary was so utterly and absolutely necessary, that the idea of existing without her never once entered into his restless but honest brain. "That is just what it is," he said; "it is a horrid business for me, and I don't know what to do about it. They must have been out of their senses to drive us to marry as we did; and we were a couple of awful fools," said the Major, with the gravest and most care-worn countenance. Mrs. Ochterlony was still a young woman, handsome and admired, and she might very well have taken offence at such words; but, oddly enough, there was something in his gravely-disturbed face and pathetic tone which touched another chord in Mary's breast. She laughed, which was unkind, considering all the circumstances, and took up her work, and fixed a pair of smiling eyes upon her perplexed husband's face.

"I daresay it is not so bad as you think," she said, with the manner of a woman who was used to this kind of thing. "Come, and tell me all about it." She drew her chair a trifle nearer his, and looked at him with a face in which a touch of suppressed amusement was visible, under a good deal of gravity and sympathy. She was used to lend a sympathetic ear to all his difficulties, and to give all her efforts to their elucidation, but still she could not help feeling it somewhat droll to be complained to in this strain about her own marriage. "We *were* a couple of fools," she said, with a little laugh, "but it has not turned out so badly as it might have done." Upon which rash statement the Major shook his head.

"It is easy for you to say so," he said, "and if I were to go no deeper, and look no further—— It is all on your account, Mary. If it were not on your account——"

"Yes, I know," said Mrs. Ochterlony, still struggling with a perverse inclination to laugh; "but now tell me what old Sommerville has to do with it; and who old Sommerville is; and what put it into his head just at this moment to die."

The Major sighed, and gave her a half-irritated, half-melancholy look. To think she should

laugh, when, as he said to himself, the gulf was yawning under her very feet. "My dear Mary," he said, "I wish you would learn that this is not anything to laugh at. Old Sommerville was the old gardener at Earlston, who went with us, you recollect, when we went to—to Scotland. My brother would never have him back again, and he went among his own friends. He was a stupid old fellow. I don't know what he was good for, for my part;—but," said Major Ochterlony, with solemnity, "he was the only surviving witness of our unfortunate marriage—that is the only thing that made him interesting to me."

"Poor old man!" said Mary, "I am very sorry. I had forgotten his name; but really,—if you speak like this of our unfortunate marriage, you will hurt my feelings," Mrs. Ochterlony added. She had cast down her eyes on her work, but still there was a gleam of fun out of one of the corners. This was all the effect made upon her mind by words which would have naturally produced a scene between half the married people in the world.

As for the Major, he sighed: he was in a sighing mood, and at such moments his wife's obtusity and thoughtlessness always made him sad. "It is easy talking," he said, "and if it were not on your account, Mary—— The fact is

that everything has gone wrong that had any connexion with it. The blacksmith's house, you know, was burned down, and his kind of a register—if it was any good, and I am sure I don't know if it was any good; and then that woman died, though she was as young as you are, and as healthy, and nobody had any right to expect that she would die," Major Ochterlony added with an injured tone, "and now old Sommerville; and we have nothing in the world to vouch for its being a good marriage, except what that blacksmith fellow called the 'lines.' Of course you have taken care of the lines," said the Major, with a little start. It was the first time that this new subject of doubt had occurred to his mind.

"To vouch for its being a good marriage!" said Mrs. Ochterlony: "really, Hugh, you go too far. Our marriage is not a thing to make jokes about, you know—nor to get up alarms about either. Everybody knows all about it, both among your people and mine. It is very vexatious and disagreeable of you to talk so." As she spoke the colour rose to Mary's matron cheek. She had learned to make great allowances for her husband's anxious temper and perpetual panics; but this suggestion was too much for her patience just at the moment.

She calmed down, however, almost immediately, and came to herself with a smile. "To think you should almost have made me angry!" she said, taking up her work again. This did not mean to imply that to make Mrs. Ochterlony angry was at all an impossible process. She had her gleams of wrath like other people, and sometimes it was not at all difficult to call them forth; but, so far as the Major's "temperament" was concerned, she had got, by much exercise, to be the most indulgent of women—perhaps by finding that no other way of meeting it was of any use.

"It is not my fault, my love," said the Major, with a meekness which was not habitual to him. "But I hope you are quite sure you have the lines. Any mistake about them would be fatal. They are the only proof that remains to us. I wish you would go and find them, Mary, and let me make sure."

"The lines!" said Mrs. Ochterlony, and, notwithstanding her self-command, she faltered a little. "Of course I must have them somewhere—I don't quite recollect at this moment. What do you want them for, Hugh? Are we coming into a fortune, or what are the statistics good for? When I can lay my hand upon them, I will give them to you," she added,

with that culpable carelessness which her husband had already so often remarked in her. If it had been a trumpery picture or book that had been mislaid, she could not have been less concerned.

"When you can lay your hands upon them!" cried the exasperated man. "Are you out of your senses, Mary? Don't you know that they are your sheet-anchor, your charter—the only document you have——"

"Hugh," said Mrs. Ochterlony, "tell me what this means. There must be something in it more than I can see. What need have I for documents? What does it matter to us this old man being dead, more than it matters to any one the death of somebody who has been at their wedding? It is sad, but I don't see how it can be a personal misfortune. If you really mean anything, tell me what it is."

The Major for his part grew angry, as was not unnatural. "If you choose to give me the attention you ought to give to your husband when he speaks seriously to you, you will soon perceive what I mean," he said; and then he repented, and came up to her and kissed her. "My poor Mary, my bonnie Mary," he said. "If that wretched irregular marriage of ours should bring harm to you! It is you only I

am thinking of, my darling—that you should have something to rest upon;" and his feelings were so genuine that with that the water stood in his eyes.

As for Mrs. Ochterlony, she was very near losing patience altogether; but she made an effort and restrained herself. It was not the first time that she had heard compunctions expressed for the irregular marriage, which certainly was not her fault. But this time she was undeniably a little alarmed, for the Major's gravity was extreme. "Our marriage is no more irregular than it always was," she said. "I wish you would give up this subject, Hugh; I have you to rest upon, and everything that a woman can have. We never did anything in a corner," she continued, with a little vehemence. "Our marriage was just as well known, and well published, as if it had been in St. George's, Hanover Square. I cannot imagine what you are aiming at. And besides, it is done, and we cannot mend it," she added, abruptly. On the whole, the runaway match had been a pleasant frolic enough; there was no earthly reason, except some people's stupid notions, why they should not have been married; and everybody came to their senses rapidly, and very little harm had come of it. But the least idea of doubt on

such a subject is an offence to a woman, and her colour rose and her breath came quick, without any will of hers. As for the Major, he abandoned the broader general question, and went back to the detail, as was natural to the man.

"If you only have the lines all safe," he said, "if you would but make sure of that. I confess old Sommerville's death was a great shock to me, Mary,—the last surviving witness; but Kirkman tells me the marriage lines in Scotland are a woman's safeguard, and Kirkman is a Scotchman and ought to know."

"Have you been consulting *him?*" said Mary, with a certain despair; "have you been talking of such a subject to——"

"I don't know where I could have a better confidant," said the Major. "Mary, my darling, they are both attached to you; and they are good people, though they talk; and then he is Scotch, and understands. If anything were to happen to me, and you had any difficulty in proving——"

"Hugh, for Heaven's sake have done with this. I cannot bear any more," cried Mrs. Ochterlony, who was at the end of her powers.

It was time for the great *coup* for which his restless soul had been preparing. He approached the moment of fate with a certain skill, such as

weak people occasionally display, and mad people almost always,—as if the feeble intellect had a certain right by reason of its weakness to the same kind of defence which is possessed by the mind diseased. "Hush, Mary, you are excited," he said, "and it is only you I am thinking of. If anything should happen to me—I am quite well, but no man can answer for his own life:—my dear, I am afraid you will be vexed with what I am going to say. But for my own satisfaction, for my peace of mind—if we were to go through the ceremony again——"

Mary Ochterlony rose up with sudden passion. It was altogether out of proportion to her husband's intentions or errors, and perhaps to the occasion. *That* was but a vexatious complication of ordinary life; and he a fidgety, uneasy, perhaps over-conscientious, well-meaning man. She rose, tragic without knowing it, with a swell in her heart of the unutterable and supreme—feeling herself for the moment an outraged wife, an insulted woman, and a mother wounded to the heart. "I will hear no more," she said, with lips that had suddenly grown parched and dry. "Don't say another word. If it has come to this, I will take my chance with my boys. Hugh, no more, no more." As she lifted her hands with an impatient gesture of horror, and towered

over him as he sat by, having thus interrupted and cut short his speech, a certain fear went through Major Ochterlony's mind. Could her mind be going? Had the shock been too much for her? He could not understand otherwise how the suggestion which he thought a wise one, and of advantage to his own peace of mind, should have stung her into such an incomprehensible passion. But he was afraid and silenced, and could not go on.

"My dear Mary," he said mildly, "I had no intention of vexing you. We can speak of this another time. Sit down, and I'll get you a glass of water," he added, with anxious affection; and hurried off to seek it: for he was a good husband, and very fond of his wife, and was terrified to see her turn suddenly pale and faint, notwithstanding that he was quite capable of wounding her in the most exquisite and delicate point. But then he did not mean it. He was a matter-of-fact man, and the idea of marrying his wife over again in case there might be any doubtfulness about the first marriage, seemed to him only a rational suggestion, which no sensible woman ought to be disturbed by; though no doubt it was annoying to be compelled to have recourse to such an expedient. So he went and fetched her the water, and gave up the subject,

and stayed with her all the afternoon and read the papers to her, and made himself agreeable. It was a puzzling sort of demonstration on Mary's part, but that did not make her the less Mary, and the dearest and best of earthly creatures. So Major Ochterlony put his proposal aside for a more favourable moment, and did all he could to make his wife forget it, and behaved himself as a man naturally would behave who was recognised as the best husband and most domestic man in the regiment. Mary took her seat again and her work, and the afternoon went on as if nothing had happened. They were a most united couple, and very happy together, as everybody knew; or if one of them at any chance moment was perhaps less than perfectly blessed, it was not, at any rate, because the love-match, irregular as it might be, had ended in any lack of love.

CHAPTER II.

MRS. OCHTERLONY sat and worked and listened, and her husband read the papers to her, picking out by instinct all those little bits of news that are grateful to people who are far away from their own country. And he went through the births and marriages, to see "if there is anybody we know,"—notwithstanding that he was aware that corner of the paper is one which a woman does not leave to any reader, but makes it a principle to examine herself. And Mary sat still and went on with her work, and not another syllable was said about old Sommerville, or the marriage lines, or anything that had to do with the previous conversation. This tranquillity was all in perfect good faith on Major Ochterlony's side, who had given up the subject with the intention of waiting until a more convenient season, and who had relieved

his mind by talking of it, and could put off his anxiety. But as for Mary, it was not in good faith that she put on this expression of outward calm. She knew her husband, and she knew that he was pertinacious and insisting, and that a question which he had once started was not to be made an end of, and finally settled, in so short a time. She sat with her head a little bent, hearing the bits of news run on like a kind of accompaniment to the quick-flowing current of her own thoughts. Her heart was beating quick, and her blood coursing through her veins as if it had been a sudden access of fever which had come upon her. She was a tall, fair, serene woman, with no paltry passion about her; but at the same time, when the occasion required it, Mary was capable of a vast suppressed fire of feeling which it gave her infinite trouble to keep down. This was a side of her character which was not suspected by the world in general—meaning of course the regiment, and the ladies at the station, who were all, more or less, military. Mrs. Ochterlony was the kind of woman to whom by instinct any stranger would have appropriated the name of Mary; and naturally all her intimates (and the regiment was very "nice," and lived in great harmony, and they were all intimate) called her

by her Christian—most Christian name. And there were people who put the word Madonna before it,—"as if the two did not mean the same thing!" said little Mrs. Askell, the ensign's baby-wife, whose education had been neglected, but whom Mrs. Ochterlony had been very kind to. It was difficult to know how the title had originated, though people did say it was young Stafford who had been brought up in Italy, and who had such a strange adoration for Mrs. Ochterlony, and who died, poor fellow—which perhaps was the best thing he could have done under the circumstances. "It was a special providence," Mrs. Kirkman said, who was the Colonel's wife: for, to be sure, to be romantically adored by a foolish young subaltern, was embarrassing for a woman, however perfect her mind and temper and fairest fame might be. It was he who originated the name, perhaps with some faint foolish thought of Petrarch and his Madonna Laura: and then he died and did no more harm; and a great many people adopted it, and Mary herself did not object to be addressed by that sweetest of titles.

And yet she was not meek enough for the name. Her complexion was very fair, but she had only a very faint rose-tint on her cheeks, so faint that people called her pale—which,

with her fairness, was a drawback to her. Her hair was light-brown, with a golden reflection that went and came, as if it somehow depended upon the state of her mind and spirits; and her eyes were dark, large, and lambent,—not sparkling, but concentrating within themselves a soft, full depth of light. It was a question whether they were grey or brown; but at all events they were dark and deep. And she was, perhaps, a little too large and full and matronly in her proportions to please a youthful critic. Naturally such a woman had a mass of hair which she scarcely knew what to do with, and which at this moment seemed to betray the disturbed state of her mind by unusual gleams of the golden reflection which sometimes lay quite tranquil and hidden among the great silky coils. She was very happily married, and Major Ochterlony was the model husband of the regiment. They had married very young, and made a runaway love-match which was one of the few which everybody allowed had succeeded to perfection. But yet—— There are so few things in this world which succeed quite to perfection. It was Mrs. Kirkman's opinion that nobody else in the regiment could have supported the Major's fidgety temper. "It would be a great trial for the most experienced Christian," she said; "and

dear Mary is still among the babes who have to be fed with milk; but Providence is kind, and I don't think she feels it as you or I would." This was the opinion of the Colonel's wife; but as for Mary, as she sat and worked and listened to her husband reading the papers, perhaps she could have given a different version of her own composure and calm.

They had been married about ten years, and it was the first time he had taken *this* idea into his head. It is true that Mrs. Ochterlony looked at it solely as one of his ideas, and gave no weight whatever to the death of old Sommerville, or the loss of the marriage lines. She had been very young at the time of her marriage, and she was motherless, and had not those pangs of wounded delicacy to encounter, which a young woman ought to have who abandons her home in such a way. This perhaps arose from a defect in Mary's girlish undeveloped character; but the truth was, that she too belonged to an Indian family, and had no home to speak of, nor any of the sweeter ties to break. And after that, she had thought nothing more about it. She was married, and there was an end of it; and the young people had gone to India immediately, and had been very poor, and very happy, and very miserable, like other young people who begin the

world in an inconsiderate way. But in spite of a hundred drawbacks, the happiness had always been pertinacious, lasted longest, and held out most steadfastly, and lived everything down. For one thing, Mrs. Ochterlony had a great deal to do, not being rich, and that happily quite preserved her from the danger of brooding over the Major's fidgets, and making something serious out of them. And then they had married so young that neither of them could ever identify himself or herself, or make the distinction that more reasonable couples can between "me" and "you." This time, however, the Major's restlessness had taken an uncomfortable form. Mary felt herself offended and insulted without knowing why. She, a matron of ten years' standing, the mother of children! She could not believe that she had really heard true, that a repetition of her marriage could have been suggested to her—and at the same time she knew that it was perfectly true. It never occurred to her as a thing that possibly might have to be done, but still the suggestion itself was a wound. Major Ochterlony, for his part, thought of it as a precaution, and good for his peace of mind, as he had said; but to Mary it was scarcely less offensive than if somebody else had ventured to make love to her, or offer her his allegiance. It

seemed to her an insult of the same description, an outrage which surely could not have occurred without some unwitting folly on her part to make such a proposal possible. She went away, searching back into the far, far distant years, as she sat at work and he read the papers. Had she anyhow failed in womanly restraint or delicacy at that moment when she was eighteen, and knew of nothing but honour, and love, and purity in the world? To be sure, she had not occupied herself very much about the matter—she had taken no pains for her own safety, and had not an idea what registrars meant, nor marriage laws, nor "lines." All that she knew was that a great many people were married at Gretna Green, and that she was married, and that there was an end of it. All these things came up and passed before her mind in a somewhat hurrying crowd; but Mary's mature judgment did not disapprove of the young bride who believed what was said to her, and was content, and had unbounded faith in the blacksmith and in her bridegroom. If that young woman had been occupying herself about the register, Mrs. Ochterlony probably, looking back, would have entertained but a mean opinion of her. It was not anything *she* had done. It was not anything special, so far as she could see, in the circumstances: for hosts of people before

and after had been married on the Scottish border. The only conclusion, accordingly, that she could come to, was the natural conclusion, that it was one of the Major's notions. But there was little comfort in that, for Mrs. Ochterlony was aware that his notions were persistent, that they lived and lasted and took new developments, and were sometimes very hard to get rid of. And she sighed in the midst of the newspaper reading, and betrayed that she had not been listening. Not that she expected her husband's new whim to come to anything; but because she foresaw in it endless repetitions of the scene which had just ended, and endless exasperation and weariness to herself.

Major Ochterlony stopped short when he heard his wife sigh—for he was not a man to leave anything alone, or to practise a discreet neglect—and laid down his paper and looked with anxiety in her face. "You have a headache," he said, tenderly; "I saw it the moment I entered the room. Go and lie down, my dear, and take care of yourself. You take care of everybody else," said the Major. "Why did you let me go on reading the paper like an ass, when your head aches?"

"My head does not ache. I was only thinking," said Mrs. Ochterlony: for she thought on the whole it would be best to resume the subject

and endeavour to make an end of it. But this was not the Major's way. He had in the meantime emptied his reservoir, and it had to be filled again before he would find himself in the vein for speech.

"But I don't want you to think," said Major Ochterlony with tender patronage: "that ought to be my part of the business. Have you got a novel?—if not, I'll go over and ask Miss Sorbette for one of hers. Lie down and rest, Mary; I can see that is all you are good for to-day."

Whether such a speech was aggravating or not to a woman who knew that it was her brain which had all the real weight of the family affairs to bear, may be conjectured by wives in general who know the sort of thing. But as for Mary, she was so used to it, that she took very little notice. She said, "Thank you, Hugh; I have got my letters here, which I have not read, and Aunt Agatha is as good as a novel." If this was not a very clear indication to the Major that his best policy was to take himself off for a little, and leave her in peace, it would be hard to say what could have taught him. But then Major Ochterlony was a man of a lively mind, and above being taught.

"Ah, Aunt Agatha," he said. "My dear, I know it is a painful subject, but we must, you know, begin to think where we are to send Hugh."

Mary shuddered; her nerves—for she had nerves, though she was so fair and serene—began to get excited. She said, "For pity's sake, not any more to-day. I am worn out. I cannot bear it. He is only six, and he is quite well."

The Major shook his head. "He is very well, but I have seen when a few hours changed all that," he said. "We cannot keep him much longer. At his age, you know; all the little Hesketh go at four—I think——"

"Ah," said Mary, "the Hesketh have nothing to do with it; they have floods and floods of children,—they don't know what it is; they can do without their little things; but I—Hugh, I am tired—I am not able for any more. Let me off for to-day."

Major Ochterlony regarded his wife with calm indulgence, and smoothed her hair off her hot forehead as he stooped to kiss her. "If you only would call things by the same names as other people, and say you have a headache, my dear," he said, in his caressing way. And then he was so good as to leave her, saying to himself as he went away that his Mary too had a little temper, though nobody gave her credit for it. Instead of annoying him, this little temper on Mary's part rather pleased her husband. When it came on he could be indulgent to her and pet her,

which he liked to do; and then he could feel the advantage on his own side, which was not always the case. His heart quite swelled over her as he went away; so good, and so wise, and so fair, and yet not without that womanly weakness which it was sweet for a man to protect and pardon and put up with. Perhaps all men are not of the same way of thinking; but then Major Ochterlony reasoned only in his own way.

Mary stayed behind, and found it very difficult to occupy herself with anything. It was not temper, according to the ordinary meaning of the word. She was vexed, disturbed, disquieted, rather than angry. When she took up the pleasant letter in which the English breezes were blowing, and the leaves rustling, she could no longer keep her attention from wandering. She began it a dozen times, and as often gave it up again, driven by the importunate thoughts which took her mind by storm, and thrust everything else away. As if it were not enough to have one great annoyance suddenly overwhelming her, she had the standing terror of her life, the certainty that she should have to send her children away, thrown in to make up. She could have cried, had that been of any use; but Mrs. Ochterlony had had good occasion to cry many times in her life, which takes away the inclination at less important mo-

ments. The worst of all was that her husband's oft-repeated suggestion struck at the very roots of her existence, and seemed to throw everything of which she had been most sure into sudden ruin. She would put no faith in it—pay no attention to it, she said to herself; and then, in spite of herself, she found that she paid great attention, and could not get it out of her mind. The only character in which she knew herself—in which she had ever been known—was that of a wife. There are some women—nay, many women—who have felt their own independent standing before they made the first great step in a woman's life, and who are able to realize their own identity without associating it for ever with that of any other. But as for Mary, she had married, as it were, out of the nursery, and except as Hugh Ochterlony's wife, and his son's mother, she did not know herself. In such circumstances, it may be imagined what a bewildering effect any doubt about her marriage would have upon her. For the first time she began to think of herself, and to see that she had been hardly dealt with. She began to resent her guardian's carelessness, and to blame even kind Aunt Agatha, who in those days was taken up with some faint love-affairs of her own, which never came to anything. Why did not they see that everything was right? Why did

not Hugh make sure, whose duty it was? After she had vexed herself with such thoughts, she returned with natural inconsistency to the conclusion that it was all one of the Major's notions. This was the easiest way of getting rid of it, and yet it was aggravating enough that the Major should permit his restless fancy to enter such sacred ground, and to play with the very foundations of their life and honour. And as if that was not enough, to talk at the end of it all of sending Hugh away!

Perhaps it would have been good for Mary if she had taken her husband's advice and lain down, and sent over to Miss Sorbette for a novel. But she was rebellious and excited, and would not do it. It was true that they were engaged out to dinner that night, and that when the hour came Mrs. Ochterlony entered Mrs. Hesketh's drawing-room with her usual composure, and without any betrayal of the agitation that was still smouldering within. But that did not make it any easier for her. There was nobody more respected, as people say, in the station than she was—and to think that it was possible that such a thing might be, as that she should be humiliated and pulled down from her fair elevation among all those women! Neither the Major nor any man had a right to have

notions upon a matter of such importance. Mary tried hard to calm herself down to her ordinary tranquillity, and to represent to herself how good he was, and how small a drawback after all were those fidgets of his, in comparison with the faults of most other men. Just as he represented to himself, with more success, how trifling a disadvantage was the "little temper" which gave him the privilege, now and then, of feeling tenderly superior to his wife. But the attempt was not successful that day in Mrs. Ochterlony's mind; for after all there are some things too sacred for discussion, and with which the most fidgety man in the world cannot be permitted to play. Such was the result of the first conversation upon this startling subject. The Major found himself very tolerably at his ease, having relieved his mind for the moment, and enjoyed his dinner and spent a very pleasant evening; but as for Madonna Mary, she might have prejudiced her serene character in the eyes of the regiment had the veil been drawn aside only for a moment, and could anybody have seen or guessed the whirl of thoughts that was passing through her uneasy mind.

CHAPTER III.

THE present writer has already lamented her inability to convey to the readers of this history any clear account of an Indian bungalow, or the manner in which life goes on in that curious kind of English home: so that it would be vain to attempt any detailed description of Mary Ochterlony's life at this period of her career. She lived very much as all the others lived, and gave a great deal of attention to her two little boys, and wrote regularly by every mail to her friends in England, and longed for the days when the mail came in, though the interest of her correspondence was not absorbing. All this she did like everybody else, though the other ladies at the station had perhaps more people belonging to them, and a larger number of letters, and got more good of the eagerly looked for mail. And she read all the books she could come by, even

Miss Sorbette's novels, which were indeed the chief literary nourishment of the station; and took her due share in society, and was generally very popular, though not so superior as Miss Sorbette for example, nor of remarkable piety like Mrs. Kirkman, nor nearly so well off as Mrs. Hesketh. Perhaps these three ladies, who were the natural leaders of society, liked Mary all the better because she did not come in direct contact with their claims; though if it had ever entered into Mrs. Ochterlony's head to set up a distinct standard, no doubt the masses would have flocked to it, and the peace of the station might have been put in jeopardy. But as no such ambitious project was in her mind, Mary kept her popularity with everybody, and gained besides that character of "She could an if she would," which goes a great deal farther than the limited reputation of any actual achievement. She was very good to the new people, the young people, the recent arrivals, and managed to make them feel at home sooner than anybody else could, which was a very useful gift in such a society; and then a wife who bore her husband's fidgets so serenely was naturally a model and example for all the new wives.

"I am sure nobody else in the station could do so well," Mrs. Kirkman said. "The most

experienced Christian would find it a trying task. But then some people are so mercifully fitted for their position in life. I don't think she feels it as you or I should." This was said, not as implying that little Mrs. Askell—to whom the words were ostensibly addressed—had peculiarly sensitive feelings, or was in any way to be associated with the Colonel's wife, but only because it was a favourite way Mrs. Kirkman had of bringing herself down to her audience, and uniting herself, as it were, to ordinary humanity; for if there was one thing more than another for which she was distinguished, it was her beautiful Christian humility; and this was the sense in which she now spoke.

"Please don't say so," cried the ensign's wife, who was an unmanageable, eighteen-year-old, half-Irish creature. "I am sure she has twenty thousand times more feeling than you and—than both of us put together. It's because she is real good; and the Major is an old dear. He *is* a fidget and he's awfully aggravating, and he puts one in a passion; but he's an old dear, and so you would say if you knew him as well as I."

Mrs. Kirkman regarded the creature by her side, as may be supposed, with the calm contempt which her utterance merited. She looked at her, out of those "down-dropt," half-veiled eyes, with

that look which everybody in the station knew so well, as if she were looking down from an infinite distance with a serene surprise which was too far off and elevated to partake of the nature of disgust. If *she* knew him as well as this baby did! But the Colonel's wife did not take any notice of the audacious suggestion. It was her duty, instead of resenting the impertinence to herself, to improve the occasion for the offender's own sake.

"My dear, there is nobody really good," said Mrs. Kirkman. "We have the highest authority for that. I wish I could think dear Mary was possessed of the true secret of a higher life; but she has so much of that natural amiability, you know, which is, of all things, the most dangerous for the soul. I would rather, for my part, she was not so 'good' as you say. It is all filthy rags," said Mrs. Kirkman, with a sigh. "It might be for the good of her soul to be brought low, and forced to abandon these refuges of lies——"

Upon which the little Irish wild-Indian blazed up with natural fury.

"I don't believe she ever told a lie in her life. I'll swear to all the lies she tells," cried the foolish little woman; "and as for rags—it's horrible to talk so. If you only knew—if you only could think—how kind she was to me!"

For this absurd little hapless child had had a baby, as might have been expected, and would have been in rags indeed, and everything that is miserable, but for Mary, who had taken her in hand; and being not much more than a baby herself, and not strong yet, and having her heart in her mouth, so to speak, she burst out crying, as might have been expected too.

This was a result which her companion had not in the least calculated upon, for Mrs. Kirkman, notwithstanding her belief in Mary's insensibility, had not very lively feelings, and was not quick at divining other people. But she was a good woman notwithstanding all her talk. She came down off her mountain top, and soothed her little visitor, and gave her a glass of wine, and even kissed her, to make matters up.

"I know she has a way, when people are sick," said the Colonel's wife; and then, after that confession, she sighed again. "If only she does not put her trust in her own works," Mrs. Kirkman added.

For, to tell the truth, the Chaplain of the regiment was not (as she thought) a spiritual-minded man, and the Colonel's wife was troubled by an abiding consciousness that it was into her hands that Providence had committed the souls of the station. "Which was an awful responsibi-

lity for a sinful creature," she said, in her letters home; "and one that required constant watch over herself."

Perhaps, in a slightly different way, Mrs. Ochterlony would have been similarly put down and defended in the other two centres of society at the station. "She is intelligent," Miss Sorbette said; "I don't deny that she is intelligent; but I would not say she was superior. She is fond of reading, but then most people are fond of reading, when it's amusing, you know. She is a little too like Amelia in 'Vanity Fair.' She is one of the sweet women. In a general way, I can't bear sweet women; but I must confess she is the very best specimen I ever saw."

As for Mrs. Hesketh, her opinion was not much worth stating in words. If she had any fault to find with Mrs. Ochterlony, it was because Mary had sometimes a good deal of trouble in making the two ends meet. "I cannot endure people that are always having anxieties," said the rich woman of the station, who had an idea that everybody could be comfortable if they liked, and that it was an offence to all his neighbours when a man insisted on being poor; but at the same time everybody knew that she was very fond of Mary. This had been the general opinion of her for all these years, and naturally Mrs. Ochterlony

was used to it, and, without being at all vain on the subject, had that sense of the atmosphere of general esteem and regard which surrounded her, which has a favourable influence upon every character, and which did a great deal to give her the sweet composure and serenity for which she was famed.

But from the time of that first conversation with her husband, a change came upon the Madonna of the station. It was not perceptible to the general vision, yet there were individual eyes which found out that something was the matter, though nobody could tell what. Mrs. Hesketh thought it was an attack of fever coming on, and Mrs. Kirkman hoped that Mrs. Ochterlony was beginning to occupy herself about her spiritual state; and the one recommended quinine to Mary, and the other sent her sermons, which, to tell the truth, were not much more suitable to her case. But Mary did not take any of the charitable friends about her into her confidence. She went about among them as a prince might have gone about in his court, or a chief among his vassals, after hearing in secret that it was possible that one day he may be discovered to be an impostor. Or, if not that,—for Mary knew that she never could be found out an impostor,—at least, that such a charge was hanging

over her head, and that somebody might believe it; and that her history would be discussed and her name get into people's mouths and her claims to their regard be questioned. It was very hard upon her to think that such a thing was possible with composure, or to contemplate her husband's restless ways, and to recollect the indiscreet confidences which he was in the habit of making. He had spoken to Colonel Kirkman about it, and even quoted his advice about the marriage lines; and Mary could not but think (though in this point she did the Colonel injustice) that Mrs. Kirkman too must know; and then, with a man of Major Ochterlony's temperament, nobody could make sure that he would not take young Askell, the ensign, or any other boy in the station, into his confidence, if he should happen to be in the way. All this was very galling to Mary, who had so high an appreciation of the credit and honour which, up to this moment, she had enjoyed; and who felt that she would rather die than come down to be discussed and pitied and talked about among all these people. She thought in her disturbed and uneasy mind, that she could already hear all the different tones in which they would say, "Poor Mary!" and all the wonders, and doubts, and inquiries that would rise up round her. Mrs. Kirkman would

have said that all these were signs that her pride wanted humbling, and that the thing her friends should pray for, should be some startling blow to lead her back to a better state of mind. But naturally this was a kind of discipline which for herself, or indeed for anybody else, Mary was not far enough advanced to desire.

Perhaps, however, it was partly true about the pride. Mrs. Ochterlony did not say anything about it, but she locked the door of her own room the next morning after that talk with the Major, and searched through all her repositories for those "marriage lines," which no doubt she had put away somewhere, and which she had naturally forgotten all about for years. It was equally natural, and to be expected, that she should not find them. She looked through all her papers, and letters, and little sacred corners, and found many things that filled her heart with sadness and her eyes with tears—for she had not come through those ten years without leaving traces behind her where her heart had been wounded and had bled by the way—but she did not find what she was in search of. She tried hard to look back and think, and to go over in her mind the contents of her little school-girl desk, which she had left at Aunt Agatha's cottage, and the little work-table, and the secretary

with all its drawers. But she could not recollect anything about it, nor where she had put it, nor what could have become of it; and the effect of her examination was to give her, this time in reality, a headache, and to make her eyes heavy and her heart sore. But she did not say a syllable about her search to the Major, who was (as, indeed, he always was) as anxiously affectionate as a man could be, and became (as he always did) when he found his wife suffering, so elaborately noiseless and still, that Mary ended by a good fit of laughing, which was of the greatest possible service to her.

"When you are so quiet, you worry me, Hugh," she said. "I am used to hear you moving about."

"My dear, I hope I am not such a brute as to move about when you are suffering," her husband replied. And though his mind had again begun to fill with the dark thoughts that had been the occasion of all Mary's annoyance, he restrained himself with a heroic effort, and did not say a syllable about it all that night.

But this was a height of virtue which it was quite impossible any merely mortal powers could keep up to. He began to make mysterious little broken speeches next day, and to stop short and to say, "My darling, I mustn't worry *you*," and

to sigh like furnace, and to worry Mary to such an extremity that her difficulty in keeping her temper and patience grew indescribable. And then, when he had afflicted her in this way till it was impossible to go any further—when he had betrayed it to her in every look, in every step, in every breath he drew—which was half a sigh—and in every restless movement he made; and when Mrs. Ochterlony, who could not sleep for it, nor rest, nor get any relief from the torture, had two red lines round her eyes, and was all but out of her senses—the stream burst forth at last, and the Major spoke:

"You remember, perhaps, Mary, what we were talking of the other day," he said, in an insidiously gentle way, one morning, early—when they had still the long, long day before them to be miserable in. "I thought it very important, but perhaps you may have forgot—about old Sommerville who died?"

"Forgot!" said Mary. She felt it was coming now, and was rather glad to have it over. "I don't know how I could forget, Hugh. What you said would have made one recollect anything; but you cannot make old Sommerville come alive again, whatever you do."

"My dear, I spoke to you about some—about a—paper," said the Major. "Lines—that is what

the Scotch call them—though, I daresay, they're very far from being poetry. Perhaps you have found them, Mary?" said Major Ochterlony, looking into her face in a pleading way, as if he prayed her to answer yes. And it was with difficulty that she kept as calm as she wished to do, and answered without letting him see the agitation and excitement in her mind.

"I don't know where I have put them, Hugh," she said, with a natural evasion, and in a low voice. She did not acknowledge having looked for them, and having failed to find them; but in spite of herself, she answered with a certain humility, as of a woman culpable. For, after all, it was her fault.

"You don't know where you put them?" said the Major, with rising horror. "Have you the least idea how important they are? They may be the saving of you and of your children, and you don't know where you have put them! Then it is all as I feared," Major Ochterlony added, with a groan, "and everything is lost."

"What is lost?" said Mary. "You speak to me in riddles, Hugh. I know I put them somewhere—I must have put them somewhere safe. They are, most likely, in my old desk at home, or in one of the drawers of the secretary," said Mary calmly, giving those local specifications

with a certainty which she was far from feeling. As for the Major, he was arrested by the circumstance which made her faint hope and supposition look somehow like truth.

"If I could hope that *that* was the case," he said; "but it can't be the case, Mary. You never were at home after we were married—you forget that. We went to Earlston for a day, and we went to your guardian's; but never to Aunt Agatha. You are making a mistake, my dear; and God bless me, to think of it, what would become of you if anything were to happen to me?"

"I hope there is nothing going to happen to you; but I don't think in that case it would matter what became of me," said Mary in utter depression; for by this time she was worn out.

"You think so now, my love; but you would be obliged to think otherwise," said Major Ochterlony. "I hope I'm all right for many a year; but a man can never tell. And the insurance, and pension, and everything—and Earlston, if my brother should leave it to us—all your future, my darling. I think it will drive me distracted," said the Major, "not a witness nor a proof left!"

Mary could make no answer. She was quite overwhelmed by the images thus called before her; for her part, the pension and the insurance money had no meaning to her ears; but it is

difficult not to put a certain faith in it when a man speaks in such a circumstantial way of things that can only happen after his death.

"You have been talking to the doctor, and he has been putting things into your head," she said faintly. "It is cruel to torture me so. We know very well how we were married, and all about it, and so do our friends, and it is cruel to try to make me think of anything happening. There is nobody in the regiment so strong and well as you are," she continued, taking courage a little. She thought to herself he looked, as people say, the picture of health, as he sat beside her, and she began to recover out of her prostration. As for spleen or liver, or any of those uncomfortable attributes, Major Ochterlony, up to this moment, had not known whether he possessed them — which was a most re-assuring thought, naturally, for his anxious wife.

"Thank God," said the Major, with a little solemnity. It was not that he had any presentiment, or thought himself likely to die early; but simply that he was in a pathetic way, and had a *naïf* and innocent pleasure in deepening his effects; and then he took to walking about the room in his nervous manner. After a while he came to a dead stop before his wife, and took both her hands into his.

"Mary," he said, "I know it's an idea that you don't like; but, for my peace of mind; suppose—just suppose for the sake of supposing—that I was to die now, and leave you without a word to prove your claims. It would be ten times worse than death, Mary; but I could die at peace if you would only make one little sacrifice to my peace of mind."

"Oh, Hugh, don't kill me—you are not going to die," was all Mary could say.

"No, my darling, not if I can help it; but if it were only for my peace of mind. There's no harm in it that I can see. It's ridiculous, you know; but that's all, Mary," said the Major, looking anxiously in her face. "Why, it is what hosts of people do every day. It is the easiest thing to do—a mere joke, for that matter. They will say, you know, that it is like Ochterlony, and a piece of his nonsense. I know how they talk; but never mind. I know very well there is nothing else that you would not do for my peace of mind. It will set your future above all casualties, and it will be all over in half an hour. For instance, Churchill says——"

"You have spoken to Mr. Churchill, too?" said Mary, with a thrill of despair.

"A man can never do any harm speaking to his clergyman, I hope," the Major said,

peevishly. "What do you mean by *too?* I've only mentioned it to Kirkman besides—I wanted his advice—and to Sorbette, to explain that bad headache of yours. And they all think I am perfectly right."

Mary put her hands up to her face, and gave a low but bitter cry. She said nothing more—not a syllable. She had already been dragged down without knowing it, and set low among all these people. She who deserved nothing but honour, who had done nothing to be ashamed of, who was the same Madonna Mary whom they had all regarded as the "wisest, virtuousest, discreetest, best." By this time they had all begun to discuss her story, and to wonder if all *had* been quite right at the beginning, and to say, "Poor Mary!" She knew it as well as if she had heard the buzz of talk in those three houses to which her husband had confided his difficulty. It was a horrible torture, if you will but think of it, for an innocent woman to bear.

"It is not like you to make such a fuss about so simple a thing," said Major Ochterlony. 'You know very well it is not myself but you I am thinking of; that you may have everything in order, and your future provided for, whatever may happen. It may be absurd, you know;

but a woman mustn't mind being absurd to please her husband. We'll ask our friends to step over with us to church in the morning, and in half an hour it will be all over. Don't cover your face, Mary. It worries me not to see your face. God bless me, it is nothing to make such a fuss about," said the Major, getting excited. "I would do a great deal more, any day, to please you."

"I would cut off my hand to please you," said Mary, with perhaps a momentary extravagance in the height of her passion. "You know there is no sacrifice I would not make for you; but oh, Hugh, not this, not this," she said, with a sob that startled him—one of those sobs that tear and rend the breast they come from, and have no accompaniment of tears.

His answer was to come up to her side, and take the face which she had been covering, between his hands, and kiss it as if it had been a child's. "My darling, it is only this that will do me any good. It is for my peace of mind," he said, with all that tenderness and effusion which made him the best of husbands. He was so loving to her that, even in the bitterness of the injury, it was hard for Mary to refuse to be soothed and softened. He had got his way, and his unbounded love and fondness surrounded her

with a kind of atmosphere of tender enthusiasm. He knew so well there was none like her, nobody fit to be put for a moment in comparison with his Mary; and this was how her fate was fixed for her, and the crisis came to an end.

CHAPTER IV.

"I AM going with you, Mary," said Mrs. Kirkman, coming suddenly in upon the morning of the day which was to give peace to Major Ochterlony's mind, and cloud over with something like a shadow of shame (or at least she thought so) his wife's fair matron fame. The Colonel's wife had put on her last white bonnet, which was not so fresh as it had been at the beginning of the season, and white gloves which were also a little the worse for wear. To be sure the marriage was not like a real marriage, and nobody knew how the unwilling bride would think proper to dress. Mrs. Kirkman came in at a quicker pace than ordinary, with her hair hanging half out of curl on either side of her face, as was always the case. She was fair, but of a greyish complexion, with light blue eyes *à fleur de la tête,* which generally she kept half veiled within their lids

—a habit which was particularly aggravating to some of the livelier spirits. She came in hastily (for her), and found Mary seated disconsolate, and doing nothing, which is, in such a woman, one of the saddest signs of a mind disturbed. Mrs. Ochterlony sat, dropped down upon a chair, with her hands listlessly clasped in her lap, and a hot flush upon her cheek. She was lost in a dreary contemplation of the sacrifice which was about to be exacted from her, and of the possible harm it might do. She was thinking of her children, what effect it might have on them—and she was thinking bitterly, that for good or evil she could not help it; that again, as on many a previous occasion, her husband's restless mind had carried the day over her calmer judgment, and that there was no way of changing it. To say that she consented with personal pain of the most acute kind, would not be to say all. She gave in, at the same time, with a foreboding utterly indistinct, and which she would not have given utterance to, yet which was strong enough to heighten into actual misery the pain and shame of her position. When Mrs. Kirkman came in, with her eyes full of observation, and making the keenest scrutiny from beneath the downcast lids, Mrs. Ochterlony was not in a position to hide her emotions. She

was not crying, it is true, for the circumstances were too serious for crying; but it was not difficult to form an idea of her state of mind from her strangely listless attitude, and the expression of her face.

"I have come to go with you," said Mrs. Kirkman. "I thought you would like to have somebody to countenance you. It will make no difference to me, I assure you, Mary; and both the Colonel and I think if there is *any* doubt, you know, that it is by far the wisest thing you could do. And I only hope——"

"Doubt!" said Mary, lighting up for the moment. "There is no more doubt than there is of all the marriages made in Scotland. The people who go there to be married are not married again afterwards that I ever heard of. There is no doubt whatever—none in the world. I beg your pardon. I am terribly vexed and annoyed, and I don't know what I am saying. To hear any one talk of doubt!"

"My dear Mary, we *know* nothing but what the Major has told us," said Mrs. Kirkman. "You may depend upon it he has reason for what he is doing; and I do hope you will see a higher hand in it all, and feel that you are being humbled for your good."

"I wish you would tell me how it can be for my good," said Mrs. Ochterlony, "when even you, who ought to know better, talk of doubt—you who have known us all along from the very first. Hugh has taken it into his head—that is the whole matter; and you, all of you, know, when he takes a thing into his head——"

She had been hurried on to say this, by the rush of her disturbed thoughts; but Mary was not a woman to complain of her husband. She came to a sudden standstill, and rose up, and looked at her watch.

"It is about time to go," she said, "and I am sorry to give you the trouble of going with me. It is not worth while for so short a distance; but, at least, don't say anything more about it, please."

Mrs. Kirkman had already made the remark that Mary was not at all "dressed." She had on her brown muslin, which was the plainest morning dress in her possession, as everybody knew; and instead of going to her room, to make herself a little nice, she took up her bonnet, which was on the table, and tied it on without even so much as looking into the glass. "I am quite ready," she said, when she had made this simple addition to her dress, and

stood there, looking everything that was most unlike the Madonna of former days—flushed and clouded over, with lines in her forehead, and the corners of her mouth dropped, and her fair large serene beauty hidden beneath the thunder-cloud. And the Colonel's wife was very sorry to see her friend in such a state of mind, as may be supposed.

"My dear Mary," Mrs. Kirkman said, taking her arm as they went out, and holding it fast. "I should much wish to see you in a better frame of mind. Man is only the instrument in our troubles. It must have been that Providence saw you stood in need of it, my dear. He knows best. It would not have been sent if it had not been for your good."

"In that way, if I were to stand in the sun till I got a sunstroke, it would still be for my good," said Mary, in her anger. "You would say, it was God's fault, and not mine. But I know it is *my* fault; I ought to have stood out and resisted, and I have not had the strength; and it is not for good, but evil. It is not God's fault, but ours. It can be for nobody's good."

But after this, she would not say any more. Not though Mrs. Kirkman was shocked at her way of speaking, and took great pains to impress

upon her that she must have been doing or thinking something which God punished by this means. "Your pride must have wanted bringing down, my dear; as we all do, Mary, both you and I," said the Colonel's wife; but then Mrs. Kirkman's humility was well known.

Thus they walked together to the chapel, whither various wondering people, who could not understand what it meant, were straying. Major Ochterlony had meant to come for his wife, but he was late, as he so often was, and met them only near the chapel-door; and then he did something which sent the last pang of which it was capable to Mary's heart, though it was only at a later period that she found it out. He found his boy with the Hindoo nurse, and brought little Hugh in, 'wildered and wondering. Mr. Churchill by this time had put his surplice on, and all was ready. Colonel Kirkman had joined his wife, and stood by her side behind the "couple," furtively grasping his grey moustache, and looking out of a corner of his eyes at the strange scene. Mrs. Kirkman, for her part, dropt her eyelids as usual, and looked down upon Mary kneeling at her feet, with a certain compassionate uncertainty, sorry that Mrs. Ochterlony did not see this trial to be for her good,

and at the same time wondering within herself whether it *had* all been perfectly right, or was not something more than a notion of the Major's. Farther back Miss Sorbette, who was with Annie Hesketh, was giving vent in a whisper to the same sentiments.

"I am very sorry for poor Mary; but *could* it be all quite right before?" Miss Sorbette was saying. "A man does not take fright like that for nothing. We women are silly, and take fancies; but when a *man* does it, you know——"

And it was with such an accompaniment that Mary knelt down, not looking like a Madonna, at her husband's side. As for the Major, an air of serenity had diffused itself over his handsome features. He knelt in quite an easy attitude, pleased with himself, and not displeased to be the centre of so interesting a group. Mary's face was slightly averted from him, and was burning with the same flush of indignation as when Mrs. Kirkman found her in her own house. She had taken off her bonnet and thrown it down by her side; and her hair was shining as if in anger and resistance to this fate, which, with closed mouth, and clasped hands, and steady front, she was submitting to, though it was almost as terrible as death. Such was the

curious scene upon which various subaltern members of society at the station looked on with wondering eyes. And little Hugh Ochterlony stood near his mother with childish astonishment, and laid up the singular group in his memory, without knowing very well what it meant; but that was a sentiment shared by many persons much more enlightened than the poor little boy, who did not know how much influence this mysterious transaction might have upon his own fate.

The only other special feature was that Mary, with the corners of her mouth turned down, and her whole soul wound up to obstinacy, would not call herself by any name but Mary Ochterlony. They persuaded her, painfully, to put her long disused maiden name upon the register, and kind Mr. Churchill shut his ears to it in the service; but yet it was a thing that everybody remarked. When all was over, nobody knew how they were expected to behave, whether to congratulate the pair, or whether to disappear and hold their tongues, which seemed in fact the wisest way. But no popular assembly ever takes the wisest way of working. Mr. Churchill was the first to decide the action of the party. He descended the altar steps, and shook hands with Mary, who stood tying her bonnet, with still the corners of

her mouth turned down, and that feverish flush on her cheeks. He was a good man, though not spiritually-minded in Mrs. Kirkman's opinion; and he felt the duty of softening and soothing his flock as much as that of teaching them, which is sometimes a great deal less difficult. He came and shook hands with her, gravely and kindly.

"I don't see that I need congratulate you, Mrs. Ochterlony," he said, "I don't suppose it makes much difference; but you know you always have all our best wishes." And he cast a glance over his audience, and reproved by that glance the question that was circulating among them. But to tell the truth, Mrs. Kirkman and Miss Sorbette paid very little attention to Mr. Churchill's looks.

"My dear Mary, you have kept up very well, though I am sure it must have been trying," Mrs. Kirkman said. "Once is bad enough; but I am sure you will see a good end in it at the last."

And while she spoke she allowed a kind of silent interrogation, from her half-veiled eyes, to steal over Mary, and investigate her from head to foot. *Had* it been all right before? Might not this perhaps be in reality the first time, the once which was bad enough? The question

crept over Mrs. Ochterlony, from the roots of her hair down to her feet, and examined her curiously to find a response. The answer was plain enough, and yet it was not plain to the Colonel's wife; for she knew that the heart is deceitful above all things, and that where human nature is considered it is always safest to believe the worst.

Miss Sorbette came forward too in her turn, with a grave face. "I am sure you must feel more comfortable after it, and I am so glad you have had the moral courage," the doctor's sister said, with a certain solemnity. But perhaps it was Annie Hesketh, in her innocence, who was the worst of all. She advanced timidly, with her face in a blaze, like Mary's own, not knowing where to look, and lost in ingenuous embarrassment.

"Oh, dear Mrs. Ochterlony, I don't know what to say," said Annie. "I am so sorry, and I hope you will always be very, very happy; and mamma couldn't come——" Here she stopped short, and looked up with candid eyes, that asked a hundred questions. And Mary's reply was addressed to her alone.

"Tell your mamma, Annie, that I am glad she could not come," said the injured wife. "It was very kind of her." When she had said so

much, Mrs. Ochterlony turned round, and saw her boy standing by, looking at her. It was only then that she turned to the husband to whom she had just renewed her troth. She looked full at him, with a look of indignation and dismay. It was the last drop that made the cup run over; but then, what was the good of saying anything? That final prick, however, brought her to herself. She shook hands with all the people afterwards, as if they were dispersing after an ordinary service, and took little Hugh's hand and went home as if nothing had happened. She left the Major behind her, and took no notice of him, and did not even, as young Askell remarked, offer a glass of wine to the assistants at the ceremony, but went home with her little boy, talking to him, as she did on Sundays going home from church; and everybody stood and looked after her, as might have been expected. She knew they were looking after her, and saying "Poor Mary!" and wondering after all if there must not have been a very serious cause for this re-marriage. Mary thought to herself that she knew as well what they were saying as if she had been among them, and yet she was not entirely so correct in her ideas of what was going on as she thought.

In the first place, she could not have imagined how a moment could undo all the fair years of unblemished life which she had passed among them. She did not really believe that they would doubt her honour, although she herself felt it clouded; and at the same time she did not know the curious compromise between cruelty and kindness, which is all that their Christian feelings can effect in many commonplace minds, yet which is a great deal when one comes to think of it. Mrs. Kirkman, arguing from the foundation of the desperate wickedness of the human heart, had gradually reasoned herself into the belief that Mary had deceived her, and had never been truly an honourable wife; but notwithstanding this conclusion, which in the abstract would have made her cast off the culprit with utter disdain, the Colonel's wife paused, and was moved, almost in spite of herself, by the spirit of that faith which she so often wrapped up and smothered in disguising talk. She did not believe in Mary; but she did, in a wordy, defective way, in Him who was the son of a woman, and who came not to condemn; and she could not find it in her heart to cast off the sinner. Perhaps if Mrs. Ochterlony had known this divine reason for her friend's charity, it would have struck a deeper blow than any other indignity to which she had been subjected.

In all her bitter thoughts, it never occurred to her that her neighbour stood by her as thinking of those Marys who once wept at the Saviour's feet. Heaven help the poor Madonna, whom all the world had heretofore honoured! In all her thoughts she never went so far as that.

The ladies waited a little, and sent away Annie Hesketh, who was too young for scenes of this sort, though her mamma was so imprudent, and themselves laid hold of Mr. Churchill, when the other gentlemen had dispersed. Mr. Churchill was one of those mild missionaries who turn one's thoughts involuntarily to that much-abused, yet not altogether despicable institution of a celibate clergy. He was far from being celibate, poor man! He, or at least his wife, had such a succession of babies as no man could number. They had children at "home" in genteel asylums for the sons and daughters of the clergy, and they had children in the airiest costume at the station, whom people were kind to, and who were waiting their chance of being sent "home" too; and withal, there were always more arriving, whom their poor papa received with a mild despair. For his part, he was not one of the happy men who held appointments under the beneficent rule of the Company, nor was he a regimental chaplain. He was one of that hapless band who are

always "doing duty" for other and better-off people. He was almost too old now (though he was not old), and too much hampered and overlaid by children, to have much hope of anything better than "doing duty" all the rest of his life; and the condition of Mrs. Churchill, who had generally need of neighbourly help, and of the children, who were chiefly clothed—such clothing as it was—by the bounty of the Colonel's and Major's and Captain's wives, somehow seemed to give these ladies the upper hand of their temporary pastor. He managed well enough among the men, who respected his goodness, and recognised him to be a gentleman, notwithstanding his poverty; but he stood in terror of the women, who were more disposed to interfere, and who were kind to his family and patronized himself. He tried hard on this occasion, as on many others, to escape, but he was hemmed in, and no outlet was left him. If he had been a celibate brother, there can be little doubt it would have been he who would have had the upper hand; but with all his family burdens and social obligations, the despotism of the ladies of his flock came hard upon the poor clergyman; all the more that, poor though he was, and accustomed to humiliations, he had not learned yet to dispense with the luxury of feelings and delicacies of his own.

"Mr. Churchill, do give us your advice," said Miss Sorbette, who was first. "Do tell us what all this means? They surely must have told *you* at least the rights of it. Do you think they have really never been married all this time? Goodness gracious me! to think of us all receiving her, and petting her, and calling her Madonna, and all that, if this should be true! Do you think——"

"I don't think anything but what Major Ochterlony told me," said Mr. Churchill, with a little emphasis. "I have not the least doubt he told me the truth. The witnesses of their marriage are dead, and that wretched place at Gretna was burnt down, and he is afraid that his wife would have no means of proving her marriage in case anything happened to him. I don't know what reason there can be to suppose that Major Ochterlony, who is a Christian and a gentleman, said anything that was not true."

"My dear Mr. Churchill," said Mrs. Kirkman, with a sigh, "you are so charitable. If one could but hope that the poor dear Major was a true Christian, as you say. But one has no evidence of any vital change in his case. And, dear Mary!—I have made up my mind for one thing, that it shall make no difference to me. Other people can do as they like, but so far as I am concerned,

I can but think of our Divine Example," said the Colonel's wife. It was a real sentiment, and she meant well, and was actually thinking as well as talking of that Divine Example; but still somehow the words made the blood run cold in the poor priest's veins.

"What can you mean, Mrs. Kirkman?" he said. "Mrs. Ochterlony is as she always was, a person whom we all may be proud to know."

"Yes, yes," said Miss Sorbette, who interrupted them both without any ceremony; "but that is not what I am asking. As for his speaking the truth as a Christian and a gentleman, I don't give much weight to that. If he has been deceiving us for all these years, you may be sure he would not stick at a fib to end off with. What is one to do? I don't believe it can have ever been a good marriage, for my part."

This was the issue to which she had come by dint of thinking it over and discussing it; although the doctor's sister, like the Colonel's wife, had got up that morning with the impression that Major Ochterlony's fidgets had finally driven him out of his senses, and that Mary was the most ill-used woman in the world.

"And I believe exactly the contrary," said the clergyman, with some heat. "I believe in an

honourable man and a pure-minded woman. I had rather give up work altogether than reject such an obvious truth."

"Ah, Mr. Churchill," Mrs. Kirkman said again, "we must not rest in these vain appearances. We are all vile creatures, and the heart is deceitful above all things. I do fear that you are taking too charitable a view."

"Yes," said Mr. Churchill, but perhaps he made a different application of the words; "I believe that about the heart; but then it shows its wickedness generally in a sort of appropriate, individual way. I daresay *they* have their thorns in the flesh, like the rest; but it is not falsehood and wantonness that are their besetting sins," said the poor man, with a plainness of speech which put his hearers to the blush.

"Goodness gracious! remember that you are talking to ladies, Mr. Churchill," Miss Sorbette said, and put down her veil. It was not a fact he was very likely to forget; and then he put on his hat as they left the chapel, and hoped he was now free to go upon his way.

"Stop a minute, please," said Miss Sorbette. "I should like to know what course of action is going to be decided on. I am very sorry for Mary, but so long as her character remains under this doubt——"

"It shall make no difference to me," said Mrs. Kirkman. "I don't pretend to regulate anybody's actions, Sabina; but when one thinks of Mary of Bethany! She may have done wrong, but I hope this occurrence will be blessed to her soul. I felt sure she wanted something to bring her low, and make her feel her need," the Colonel's wife added, with solemnity; "and it is such a lesson for us all. In other circumstances, the same thing might have happened to you or me."

"It could never have happened to me," said Miss Sorbette, with sudden wrath; which was a fortunate diversion for Mr. Churchill. This was how her friends discussed her after Mary had gone away from her second wedding; and perhaps they were harder upon her than she had supposed even in her secret thoughts.

CHAPTER V.

BUT the worst of all to Mrs. Ochterlony was that little Hugh had been there—Hugh, who was six years old, and so intelligent for his age. The child was very anxious to know what it meant, and why she knelt by his father's side while all the other people were standing. Was it something particular they were praying for, which Mrs. Kirkman and the rest did not want? Mary satisfied him as she best could, and by-and-by he forgot, and began to play with his little brother as usual; but his mother knew that so strange a scene could not fail to leave some impression. She sat by herself that long day, avoiding her husband for perhaps the first time in her life, and imagining a hundred possibilities to herself. It seemed to her as if everybody who ever heard of her henceforth must hear of this, and as if she must go through the world with a

continual doubt upon her; and Mary's weakness was to prize fair reputation and spotless honour above everything in the world. Perhaps Mrs. Kirkman was not so far wrong after all, and there was a higher meaning in the unlooked-for blow that thus struck her at her tenderest point; but that was an idea she could not receive. She could not think that God had anything to do with her husband's foolish restlessness, and her own impatient submission. It was a great deal more like a malicious devil's work, than anything a beneficent providence could have arranged. This way of thinking was far from bringing Mary any consolation or solace, but still there was a certain reasonableness in her thoughts. And then an indistinct foreboding of harm to her children, she did not know what, or how to be brought about, weighed upon Mary's mind. She kept looking at them as they played beside her, and thinking how, in the far future, the meaning of that scene he had been a witness to might flash into Hugh's mind when he was a man, and throw a bewildering doubt upon his mother's name, which perhaps she might not be living to clear up; and these ideas stung her like a nest of serpents, each waking up and darting its venom to her heart at a separate moment. She had been very sad and very sorry many a time before in

her life,—she had tasted all the usual sufferings of humanity; and yet she had never been what may be called *unhappy*, tortured from within and without, dissatisfied with herself and everything about her. Major Ochterlony was in every sense of the word a good husband, and he had been Mary's support and true companion in all her previous troubles. He might be absurd now and then, but he never was anything but kind and tender and sympathetic, as was the nature of the man. But the special feature of this misfortune was that it irritated and set her in arms against him, that it separated her from her closest friend and all her friends, and that it made even the sight and thought of her children, a pain to her among all her other pains.

This was the wretched way in which Mary spent the day of her second wedding. Naturally, Major Ochterlony brought people in with him to lunch (probably it should be written tiffin, but our readers will accept the generic word), and was himself in the gayest spirits, and insisted upon champagne, though he knew they could not afford it. "We ate our real wedding breakfast all by ourselves in that villanous little place at Gretna," he said, with a boy's enthusiasm, "and had trout out of the Solway: don't you recollect, Mary? Such trout!

What a couple of happy young fools we were; and if every Gretna Green marriage turned out like mine!" the Major added, looking at his wife with beaming eyes. She had been terribly wounded by his hand, and was suffering secret torture, and was full of the irritation of pain; and yet she could not so steel her heart as not to feel a momentary softening at sight of the love and content in his eyes. But though he loved her he had sacrificed all her scruples, and thrown a shadow upon her honour, and filled her heart with bitterness, to satisfy an unreasonable fancy of his own, and give peace, as he said, to his mind. All this was very natural, but in the pain of the moment it seemed almost inconceivable to Mary, who was obliged to conceal her mortification and suffering, and minister to her guests as she was wont to do, without making any show of the shadow that she felt to have fallen upon her life.

It was, however, tacitly agreed by the ladies of the station to make no difference, according to the example of the Colonel's wife. Mrs. Kirkman had resolved upon that charitable course from the highest motives, but the others were perhaps less elevated in their principles of conduct. Mrs. Hesketh, who was quite a worldly-minded woman, concluded that it would be absurd for one to

take any step unless they all did, and that on the whole, whatever were the rights of it, Mary could be no worse than she had been for all the long time they had known her. As for Miss Sorbette, who was strong-minded, she was disposed to consider that the moral courage the Ochterlonys had displayed in putting an end to an unsatisfactory state of affairs merited public appreciation. Little Mrs. Askell, for her part, rushed headlong as soon as she heard of it, which fortunately was not until it was all over, to see her suffering protectress. Perhaps it was at that moment, for the first time, that the ensign's wife felt the full benefit of being a married lady, able to stand up for her friend and stretch a small wing of championship over her. She rushed into Mrs. Ochterlony's presence and arms like a little tempest, and cried and sobbed and uttered inarticulate exclamations on her friend's shoulder, to Mary's great surprise, who thought something had happened to her. Fortunately the little eighteen-year-old matron, after the first incoherence was over, began to find out that Mrs. Ochterlony looked the same as ever, and that nothing tragical could have happened, and so restrained the offer of her own countenance and support, which would have been more humbling to Mary than all the desertion in the world.

"What is the matter, my dear?" said Mrs. Ochterlony, who had regained her serene looks, though not her composed mind; and little Irish Emma, looking at her, was struck with such a sense of her own absurdity and temerity and ridiculous pretensions, that she very nearly broke down again.

"I've been quarrelling with Charlie," the quick-witted girl said, with the best grace she could, and added in her mind a secret clause to soften down the fiction,—"he is so aggravating; and when I saw my Madonna looking so sweet and so still——"

"Hush!" said Mary "there was no need for crying about that—nor for telling fibs either," she added, with a smile that went to the heart of the ensign's wife. "You see there is nothing the matter with me," Mrs. Ochterlony added; but notwithstanding her perfect composure it was in a harder tone.

"I never expected anything else," said the impetuous little woman; "as if any nonsense could do any harm to you! And I love the Major, and I always have stood up for him; but oh, I should just like for once to box his ears."

"Hush!" said Mary again; and then the need she had of sympathy prompted her for one moment to descend to the level of the little girl

beside her, who was all sympathy and no criticism, which Mary knew to be a kind of friendship wonderfully uncommon in this world. "It did me no harm," she said, feeling a certain relief in dropping her reserve, and making visible the one thing of which they were both thinking, and which had no need of being identified by name. "It did me no harm, and it pleased him. I don't deny that it hurt at the time," Mary added after a little pause, with a smile; "but that is all over now. You do not need to cry over me, my dear."

"I—cry over you," cried the prevaricating Emma, "as if such a thing had ever come into my head; but I *did* feel glad I was a married lady," the little thing added; and then saw her mistake, and blushed and faltered and did not know what to say next. Mrs. Ochterlony knew very well what her young visitor meant, but she took no notice, as was the wisest way. She had steeled herself to all the consequences by this time, and knew she must accustom herself to such allusions and to take no notice of them. But it was hard upon her, who had been so good to the child, to think that little Emma was glad she was a married lady, and could in her turn give a certain countenance. All these sharp, secret, unseen arrows went direct to Mary's heart.

But on the whole the regiment kept its word and made no difference. Mrs. Kirkman called every Wednesday and took Mary with her to the prayer-meeting which she held among the soldiers' wives, and where she said she was having much precious fruit; and was never weary of representing to her companion that she had need of being brought down and humbled, and that for her part she would rejoice in anything which would bring her dear Mary to a more serious way of thinking; which was an expression of feeling perfectly genuine on Mrs. Kirkman's part, though at the same time she felt more and more convinced that Mrs. Ochterlony had been deceiving her, and was not by any means an innocent sufferer. The Colonel's wife was quite sincere in both these beliefs, though it would be hard to say how she reconciled them to each other; but then a woman is not bound to be logical, whether she belongs to the High or Low Church. At the same time she brought Mary sermons to read, with passages marked, which were adapted for both these states of feeling,—some consoling the righteous who were chastened because they were beloved, and some exhorting the sinners who had been long callous and now were beginning to awaken to a sense of their sins. Perhaps Mary, who was not very discriminating in point

of sermon-books, read both with equal innocence, not seeing their special application: but she could scarcely be so blind when her friend discoursed at the Mothers' Meeting upon the Scripture Marys, and upon her who wept at the Saviour's feet. Mrs. Ochterlony understood then, and never forgot afterwards, that it was *that* Mary with whom, in the mind of one of her most intimate associates, she had come to be identified. Not the Mary blessed among women, the type of motherhood and purity, but the other Mary, who was forgiven much because she had much loved. That night she went home with a swelling heart, wondering over the great injustice of human ways and dealings, and crying within herself to the Great Spectator who knew all against the evil thoughts of her neighbours. Was that what they all believed of her, all these women? and yet she had done nothing to deserve it, not so much as by a light look, or thought, or word; and it was not as if she could defend herself, or convince them of their cruelty: for nobody accused her, nobody reproached her—her friends, as they all said, made no difference. This was the sudden cloud that came over Mary in the very fairest and best moment of her life.

But as for the Major, he knew nothing about all that. It had been done for his peace of mind,

and until the next thing occurred to worry him he was radiant with good-humour and satisfaction. If he saw at any time a cloud on his wife's face, he thought it was because of that approaching necessity which took the pleasure out of everything even to himself, for the moment, when he thought of it—the necessity of sending Hugh "home." "We shall still have Islay for a few years at least, my darling," he would say, in his affectionate way; "and then the baby,"—for there was a baby, which had come some time after the event which we have just narrated. That too must have had something to do, no doubt, with Mary's low spirits. "He'll get along famously with Aunt Agatha, and get spoiled, that fellow will," the Major said; "and as for Islay, we'll make a man of him." And except at those moments, when, as we have just said, the thoughts of his little Hugh's approaching departure struck him, Major Ochterlony was as happy and light-hearted as a man who is very well off in all his domestic concerns, and getting on in his profession, and who has a pleasant consciousness of doing his duty to all men and a greatful sense of the mercies of God, should be, and naturally is. When two people are yoked for life together, there is generally one of the two who bears the burden, while the other takes

things easy. Sometimes it is the husband, as is fit and right, who has the heavy weight on his shoulders; but sometimes, and oftener than people think, it is the wife. And perhaps this was why Major Ochterlony was so frisky in his harness, and Madonna Mary felt her serenity fall into sadness, and was conscious of going on very slowly and heavily upon the way of life. Not that he was to blame, who was now, as always, the best husband in the regiment, or even in the world. Mary would not for all his fidgets, not for any reward, have changed him against Colonel Kirkman with his fishy eye, nor against Captain Hesketh's jolly countenance, nor for anybody else within her range of vision. He was very far from perfect, and in utter innocence had given her a wound which throbbed and bled daily whichever way she turned herself, and which she would never cease to feel all her life; but still at the same time he stood alone in the world, so far as Mary's heart was concerned: for true love is, of all things on earth, the most pertinacious and unreasonable, let the philosophers say what they will.

And then the baby, for his part, was not like what the other babies had been; he was not a great fellow, like Hugh and Islay; but puny

and pitiful and weakly,—a little selfish soul that would leave his mother no rest. She had been content to leave the other boys to Providence and Nature, tending them tenderly, wholesomely, and not too much, and hoping to make men of them some day; but with this baby Mary fell to dreaming, wondering often as he lay in her lap what his future would be. She used to ask herself unconsciously, without knowing why, what his influence might be on the lives of his brothers, who were like and yet so unlike him: though when she roused up she rebuked herself, and thought how much more reasonable it would be to speculate upon Hugh's influence, who was the eldest, or even upon Islay, who had the longest head in the regiment, and looked as if he meant to make some use of it one day. To think of the influence of little weakly Wilfrid coming to be of any permanent importance in the lives of those two strong fellows seemed absurd enough; and yet it was an idea which would come back to her, when she thought without thinking, and escaped as it were into a spontaneous state of mind. The name even was a weak-minded sort of name, and did not please Mary; and all sorts of strange fancies came into her head as she sat with the pitiful

little peevish baby, who insisted upon having all her attention, lying awake and fractious upon her wearied knee.

Thus it was that the first important scene of her history came to an end, with thorns which she never dreamed of planted in Mrs. Ochterlony's way, and a still greater and more unthought-of cloud rising slowly upon the broken serenity of her life.

CHAPTER VI.

EVERYTHING however went on well enough at the station for some time after the great occurrence which counted for so much in Mrs. Ochterlony's history; and the Major was very peaceable, for him, and nothing but trifling matters being in his way to move him, had fewer fidgets than usual. To be sure he was put out now and then by something the Colonel said or did, or by Hesketh's well-off-ness, which had come to the length of a moral peculiarity, and was trying to a man; but these little disturbances fizzed themselves out, and got done with without troubling anybody much. There was a lull, and most people were surprised at it, and disposed to think that something must be the matter with the Major; but there was nothing the matter. Probably it occurred to him now and then that his last great fidget had rather gone a step too far—but this is mere con-

jecture, for he certainly never said so. And then, after a while, he began to play, as it were, with the next grand object of uneasiness which was to distract his existence. This was the sending "home" of little Hugh. It was not that he did not feel to the utmost the blank this event would cause in the house, and the dreadful tug at his heart, and the difference it would make to Mary. But at the same time it was a thing that had to be done, and Major Ochterlony hoped his feelings would never make him fail in his duty. He used to feel Hugh's head if it was hot, and look at his tongue at all sorts of untimely moments, which Mary knew meant nothing, but yet which made her thrill and tremble to her heart; and then he would shake his own head and look sad. "I would give him a little quinine, my dear," he would say; and then Mary, out of her very alarm and pain, would turn upon him.

"Why should I give him quinine? It is time enough when he shows signs of wanting it. The child is quite well, Hugh." But there was a certain quiver in Mrs. Ochterlony's voice which the Major could not and did not mistake.

"Oh yes, he is quite well," he would reply; "come and let me feel if you have any flesh

on your bones, old fellow. He is awfully thin, Mary. I don't think he would weigh half so much as he did a year ago if you were to try. I don't want to alarm you, my dear; but we must do it sooner or later, and in a thing that is so important for the child, we must not think of ourselves," said Major Ochterlony; and then again he laid his hand with that doubting, experimenting look upon the boy's brow, to feel "if there was any fever," as he said.

"He is quite well," said Mary, who felt as if she were going distracted while this pantomime went on. "You do frighten me, though you don't mean it; but I *know* he is quite well."

"Oh yes," said Major Ochterlony, with a sigh; and he kissed his little boy solemnly, and set him down as if things were in a very bad way; "he is quite well. But I have seen when five or six hours have changed all that," he added with a still more profound sigh, and got up as if he could not bear further consideration of the subject, and went out and strolled into somebody's quarters, where Mary did not see how lighthearted he was half-an-hour after, quite naturally, because he had poured out his uneasiness, and a little more, and got quite rid of it, leaving her with the arrow sticking in her heart.

No wonder that Mrs. Kirkman, who came in as the Major went out, said that even a very experienced Christian would have found it trying. As for Mary, when she woke up in the middle of the night, which little peevish Wilfrid gave her plenty of occasion to do, she used to steal off as soon as she had quieted that baby-tyrant, and look at her eldest boy in his little bed, and put her soft hand on his head, and stoop over him to listen to his breathing. And sometimes she persuaded herself that his forehead *was* hot, which it was quite likely to be, and got no more sleep that night; though as for the Major, he was a capital sleeper. And then somehow it was not so easy as it had been to conclude that it was only his way; for after his way had once brought about such consequences as in that remarriage which Mary felt a positive physical pain in remembering, it was no longer to be taken lightly. The consequence was, that Mrs. Ochterlony wound herself up, and summoned all her courage, and wrote to Aunt Agatha, though she thought it best, until she had an answer, to say nothing about it; and she began to look over all little Hugh's wardrobe, to make and mend, and consider within herself what warm things she could get him for the termination of that inevitable voyage, and to think what

might happen before she had these little things of his in her care again—how they would wear out and be replenished, and his mother have no hand in it—and how he would get on without her. She used to make pictures of the little forlorn fellow on shipboard, and how he would cry himself to sleep, till the tears came dropping on her needle and rusted it; and then would try to think how good Aunt Agatha would be to him, but was not to say comforted by that—not so much as she ought to have been. There was nothing in the least remarkable in all this, but only what a great many people have to go through, and what Mrs. Ochterlony no doubt would go through with courage when the inevitable moment came. It was the looking forward to and rehearsing it, and the Major's awful suggestions, and the constant dread of feeling little Hugh's head hot, or his tongue white, and thinking it was her fault—this was what made it so hard upon Mary; though Major Ochterlony never meant to alarm her, as anybody might see.

"I think he should certainly go home," Mrs. Kirkman said. "It is a trial, but it is one of the trials that will work for good. I don't like to blame you, Mary, but I have always thought your children were a temptation to you; oh,

take care!—if you were to make idols of them——"

"I don't make idols of them," said Mrs. Ochterlony, hastily; and then she added, with an effort of self-control which stopped even the rising colour on her cheek, "You know I don't agree with you about these things." She did not agree with Mrs. Kirkman; and yet to tell the truth, where so much is concerned, it is a little hard for a woman, however convinced she may be of God's goodness, not to fail in her faith and learn to think that, after all, the opinion which would make an end of her best hopes and her surest confidence may be true.

"I know you don't agree with me," said the Colonel's wife, sitting down with a sigh. "Oh, Mary, if you only knew how much I would give to see you taking these things to heart—to see you not almost, but altogether such as I am," she added, with solemn pathos. "If you would but remember that these blessings are only lent us—that we don't know what day or hour they may be taken back again——"

All this Mary listened to with a rising of nature in her heart against it, and yet with that wavering behind,—What if it might be true?

"Don't speak to me so," she said. "You

always make me think that something is going to happen. As if God grudged us our little happiness. Don't talk of lending and taking back again. If *He* is not a cheerful giver, who can be?" For she was carried away by her feelings, and was not quite sure what she was saying—and at the same time, it comes so much easier to human nature to think that God grudges and takes back again, and is not a cheerful giver. As for Mrs. Kirkman, she thought it sinful so much as to imagine anything of the kind.

"It grieves me to hear you speak in that loose sort of latitudinarian way," she said; "oh, my dear Mary, if you could only see how much need you have to be brought low. When one cross is not enough, another comes—and I feel that you are not going to be let alone. This trial, if you take it in a right spirit, may have the most blessed consequences. It must be to keep you from making an idol of him, my dear—for if he takes up your heart from better things——"

What could Mary say? She stopped in her work to give her hands an impatient wring together, by way of expressing somehow in secret to herself the impatience with which she listened. Yet perhaps, after all, it might be true. Perhaps God was not such a Father as He, the supreme

and all-loving, whom her own motherhood shadowed forth in Mary's heart, but such a one as those old pedant fathers, who took away pleasures and reclaimed gifts, for discipline's sake. Perhaps—for when a heart has everything most dear to it at stake, it has such a miserable inclination to believe the worst of Him who leaves his explanation to the end,—Mary thought perhaps it might be true, and that God her Father might be lying in wait for her somewhere to crush her to the ground for having too much pleasure in his gift,—which was the state of mind which her friend, who was at the bottom of her heart a good woman, would have liked to bring about.

"I think it is simply because we are in India," said Mrs. Ochterlony, recovering herself; "it is one of the conditions of our lot. It is a very hard condition, but of course we have to bear it. I think, for my part, that God, instead of doing it to punish me, is sorry for me, and that He would mend it and spare us if something else did not make it necessary. But perhaps it is you who are right," she added, faltering again, and wondering if it was wrong to believe that God, in a wonderful supreme way, must be acting, somehow as in a blind ineffective way, she, a mother, would do to her children. But

happily her companion was not aware of that profane thought. And then, Mrs. Hesketh had come in, who looked at the question from entirely a different point of view.

"We have all got to do it, you know," said that comfortable woman, "whether we idolize them or not. I don't see what that has to do with it; but then I never do understand *you*. The great thing is, if you have somebody nice to send them to. One's mother is a great comfort for that; but then, there is one's husband's friends to think about. I am not sure, for my own part, that a good school is not the best. *That* can't offend anybody, you know; neither your own people, nor *his;* and then they can go all round in the holidays. Mine have all got on famously," said Mrs. Hesketh; and nobody who looked at her could have thought anything else. Though, indeed, Mrs. Hesketh's well-off-ness was not nearly so disagreeable or offensive to other people as her husband's, who had his balance at his banker's written on his face; whereas in her case it was only evident that she was on the best of terms with her milliner and her jeweller, and all her tradespeople, and never had any trouble with her bills. Mary sat between the woman who had no children, and who thought she made idols of her boys—and the woman who had

quantities of children, and saw no reason why anybody should be much put out of their way about them; and neither the one nor the other knew what she meant, any more than she perhaps knew exactly what they meant, though, as was natural, that latter idea did not much strike her. And the sole strengthening which Mrs. Ochterlony drew from this talk was a resolution never to say anything more about it; to keep what she was thinking of to herself, and shut another door in her heart, which, after all, is a process which has to be pretty often repeated as one goes through the world.

"But Mary has no friends—no *female* friends, poor thing. It is so sad for a girl when that happens, and accounts for so many things," the Colonel's wife said, dropping the lids over her eyes, and with an imperceptible shake of her head, which brought the little chapel and the scene of her second marriage in a moment before Mary's indignant eyes; "but there is one good even in that, for it gives greater ground for faith; when we have nothing and nobody to cling to——"

"We were talking of the children," Mrs. Hesketh broke in calmly. "If I were you I should keep Hugh until Islay was old enough to go with him. They are such companions to

each other, you know, and two children don't cost much more than one. If I were you, Mary, I would send the two together. I always did it with mine. And I am sure you have somebody that will take care of them; one always has somebody in one's eye; and as for female friends——"

Mary stopped short the profanity which doubtless her comfortable visitor was about to utter on this subject. "I have nothing but female friends," said, with a natural touch of sharpness in her voice. "I have an aunt and a sister who are my nearest relatives—and it is there Hugh is going," for the prick of offence had been good for her nerves, and strung them up.

"Then I can't see what you have to be anxious about," said Mrs. Hesketh; "some people always make a fuss about things happening to children; why should anything happen to them? mine have had everything, I think, that children can have, and never been a bit the worse; and though it makes one uncomfortable at the time to think of their being ill, and so far away if anything should happen, still, if you know they are in good hands, and that everything is done that can be done—— And then, one never hears till the worst is over," said the well-off woman, drawing her lace shawl round her. "Good-by, Mary, and don't fret;

there is nothing that is not made worse by fretting about it; I never do, for my part."

Mrs. Kirkman threw a glance of pathetic import out of the corners of her down-dropped eyes at the large departing skirts of Mary's other visitor. The Colonel's wife was one of the people who always stay last, and her friends generally cut their visits short when they encountered her, with a knowledge of this peculiarity, and at the same time an awful sense of something that would be said when they had withdrawn. "Not that I care for what she says," Mrs. Hesketh murmured to herself as she went out, "and Mary ought to know better at least;" but at the same time, society at the station, though it was quite used to it, did not like to think of the sigh, and the tender, bitter lamentations which would be made over them when they took their leave. Mrs. Hesketh was not sensitive, but she could not help feeling a little aggrieved, and wondering what special view of her evil ways her regimental superior would take this time—for in so limited a community, everybody knew about everybody, and any little faults one might have were not likely to be hid.

Mrs. Kirkman had risen too, and when Mary came back from the door the Colonel's wife came and sat down beside her on the sofa, and took

Mrs. Ochterlony's hand. "She would be very nice, if she only took a little thought about the one thing needful," said Mrs. Kirkman, with the usual sigh. "What does it matter about all the rest? Oh, Mary, if we could only choose the good part which cannot be taken away from us!"

"But surely, we all try a little after that," said Mary. "She is a kind woman, and very good to the poor. And how can we tell what her thoughts are? I don't think we ever understand each other's thoughts."

"I never pretend to understand. I judge according to the Scripture rule," said Mrs. Kirkman; "you are too charitable, Mary; and too often, you know, charity only means laxness. Oh, I cannot tell you how those people are all laid upon my soul! Colonel Kirkman being the principal officer, you know, and so little real Christian work to be expected from Mr. Churchill, the responsibility is terrible. I feel sometimes as if I must die under it. If their blood should be demanded at my hands!"

"But surely God must care a little about them Himself," said Mrs. Ochterlony. "Don't you think so? I cannot think that He has left it all upon you——"

"Dear Mary, if you but give me the comfort

of thinking I had been of use to *you*," said Mrs. Kirkman, pressing Mary's hand. And when she went away she believed that she had done her duty by Mrs. Ochterlony at least; and felt that perhaps, as a brand snatched from the burning, this woman, who was so wrapped up in regard for the world and idolatry of her children, might still be brought into a better state. From this it will be seen that the painful impression made by the marriage had a little faded out of the mind of the station. It was there, waiting any chance moment or circumstance that might bring the name of Madonna Mary into question; but in the meantime, for the convenience of ordinary life, it had been dropped. It was a nuisance to keep up a sort of shadowy censure which never came to anything, and by tacit consent the thing had dropped. For it was a very small community, and if any one had to be tabooed, the taboo must have been complete and crushing, and nobody had the courage for that. And so gradually the cloudiness passed away like a breath on a mirror, and Mary to all appearance was among them as she had been before. Only no sort of compromise could really obliterate the fact from anybody's recollection, or above all from her own mind.

And Mary went back to little Hugh's ward-

robe when her visitors were gone, with that sense of having shut another door in her heart which has already been mentioned. It is so natural to open all the doors and leave all the chambers open to the day; but when people walk up to the threshold and look in and turn blank looks of surprise or sad looks of disapproval upon you, what is to be done but to shut the door? Mrs. Ochterlony thought as most people do, that it was almost incredible that her neighbours did not understand what she meant; and she thought too, like an inexperienced woman, that this was an accident of the station, and that elsewhere other people knew better, which was a very fortunate thought, and did her good. And so she continued to put her boy's things in order, and felt half angry when she saw the Major come in, and knew beforehand that he was going to resume his pantomime with little Hugh, and to try if his head was hot and look at his tongue. If his tongue turned out to be white and his head feverish, then Mary knew that he would think it was her fault, and began to long for Aunt Agatha's letter, which she had been fearing, and which might be looked for by the next mail.

As for the Major, he came home with the air of a man who has hit upon a new trouble. His wife saw it before he had been five minutes in

the house. She saw it in his eyes, which sought her and retired from her in their significant restless way, as if studying how to begin. In former days Mrs. Ochterlony, when she saw this, used to help her husband out; but recently she had had no heart for that, and he was left unaided to make a beginning for himself. She took no notice of his fidgeting, nor of the researches he made all about the room, and all the things he put out of their places. She could wait until he informed her what it was. But Mary felt a little nervous until such time as her husband had seated himself opposite her, and began to pull her working things about, and to take up little Hugh's linen blouses which she had been setting in order. Then the Major heaved a demonstrative sigh. He meant to be asked what it meant, and even gave a glance up at her from the corner of his eye to see if she remarked it, but Mary was hard-hearted and would take no notice. He had to take all the trouble himself.

"He will want warmer things when he goes home," said the Major. "You must write to Aunt Agatha about that, Mary. I have been thinking a great deal about his going home. I don't know how I shall get on without him, nor you either, my darling; but it is for his good. How old is Islay?" Major Ochterlony added

with a little abruptness: and then his wife knew what it was.

"Islay is not quite three," said Mary, quietly, as if the question was of no importance; but for all that her heart began to jump and beat against her breast.

"Three! and so big for his age," said the guilty Major, labouring with his secret meaning. "I don't want to vex you, Mary, my love, but I was thinking perhaps when Hugh went; it comes to about the same thing, you see—the little beggar would be dreadfully solitary by himself, and I don't see that it would make any difference to Aunt Agatha——"

"It would make a difference to *me*," said Mary. "Oh, Hugh, don't be so cruel to me. I cannot let him go so young. If Hugh must go, it may be for *his* good—but not for Islay's, who is only a baby. He would not know us or have any recollection of us. Don't make me send both of my boys away."

"You would still have the baby," said the Major. "My darling, I am not going to do anything without your consent. Islay looked dreadfully feverish the other day, you know. I told you so; and as I was coming home I met Mrs. Hesketh——"

"You took *her* advice about it," said Mary,

with a little bitterness. As for the Major, he set his Mary a whole heaven above such a woman as Mrs. Hesketh, and yet he *had* taken her advice about it, and it irritated him a little to perceive his wife's tone of reproach.

"If I listened to her advice it was because she is a very sensible woman," said Major Ochterlony. "You are so heedless, my dear. When your children's health is ruined, you know, that is not the time to send them home. We ought to do it now, while they are quite well; though indeed I thought Islay very feverish the other night," he added, getting up again in his restless way. And then the Major was struck with compunction when he saw Mary bending down over her work, and remembered how constantly she was there, working for them, and how much more trouble those children cost her than they ever could cost him. "My love," he said, coming up to her and laying his hand caressingly upon her bent head, "my bonnie Mary! you did not think I meant that you cared less for them, or what was for their good, than I do? It will be a terrible trial; but then, if it is for their good and our own peace of mind——"

"God help me," said Mary, who was a little beside herself. "I don't think you will leave me any peace of mind. You will drive me to do

what I think wrong, or, if I don't do it, you will make me think that everything that happens is my fault. You don't mean it, but you are cruel, Hugh."

"I am sure I don't mean it," said the Major, who, as usual, had had his say out; "and when you come to think——but we will say no more about it to-night. Give me your book, and I will read to you for an hour or two. It is a comfort to come in to you and get a little peace. And after all, my love, Mrs. Hesketh means well, and she's a very sensible woman. I don't like Hesketh, but there's not a word to say against her. They are all very kind and friendly. We are in great luck in our regiment. Is this your mark where you left off? Don't let us say anything more about it, Mary, for to-night."

"No," said Mrs. Ochterlony, with a sigh; but she knew in her heart that the Major would begin to feel Islay's head, if it was hot, and look at his tongue, as he had done to Hugh's, and drive her out of her senses; and that, most likely, when she had come to an end of her powers, she would be beaten and give in at the last. But they said no more about it that night; and the Major got so interested in the book that he sat all the evening reading, and Mary got very well on with her work. Major Ochterlony

was so interested that he even forgot to look as if he thought the children feverish when they came to say good night, which was the most wonderful relief to his wife. If thoughts came into her head while she trimmed Hugh's little blouses, of another little three-year-old traveller tottering by his brother's side, and going away on the stormy dangerous sea, she kept them to herself. It did not seem to her as if she could outlive the separation, nor how she could permit a ship so richly freighted to sail away into the dark distance and the terrible storms; and yet she knew that she must outlive it, and that it must happen, if not now, yet at least some time. It is the condition of existence for the English sojourners in India. And what was she more than another, that any one should think there was any special hardship in her case?

CHAPTER VII.

THE next mail was an important one in many ways. It was to bring Aunt Agatha's letter about little Hugh, and it did bring something which had still more effect upon the Ochterlony peace of mind. The Major, as has been already said, was not a man to be greatly excited by the arrival of the mail. All his close and pressing interests were at present concentrated in the station. His married sisters wrote to him now and then, and he was very glad to get their letters, and to hear when a new niece or nephew arrived, which was the general burden of these epistles. Sometimes it was a death, and Major Ochterlony was sorry; but neither the joy nor the sorrow disturbed him much. For he was far away, and he was tolerably happy himself, and could bear with equanimity the vicissitudes in the lot of his friends. But this time the

letter which arrived was of a different description. It was from his brother, the head of the house—who was a little of an invalid and a good deal of a dilettante, and gave the Major no nephews or nieces, being indeed a confirmed bachelor of the most hopeless kind. He was a man who never wrote letters, so that the communication was a little startling. And yet there was nothing very particular in it. Something had occurred to make Mr. Ochterlony think of his brother, and the consequence was that he had drawn his writing things to his hand and written a few kind words, with a sense of having done something meritorious to himself and deeply gratifying to Hugh. He sent his love to Mary, and hoped the little fellow was all right who was, he supposed, to carry on the family honours—"if there are any family honours," the Squire had said, not without an agreeable sense that there was something in his last paper on the "Coins of Agrippa," that the Numismatic Society would not willingly let die. This was the innocent morsel of correspondence which had come to the Major's hand. Mary was sitting by with the baby on her lap while he read it, and busy with a very different kind of communication. She was reading Aunt Agatha's letter which she had been dreading and

wishing for, and her heart was growing sick over the innocent flutter of expectation and kindness and delight which was in it. Every assurance of the joy she would feel in seeing little Hugh, and the care she would take of him, which the simple-minded writer sent to be a comfort to Mary, came upon the mother's unreasonable mind like a kind of injury. To think that anybody could be happy about an occurrence that would be so terrible to her; to think anybody could have the bad taste to say that they looked with impatience for the moment that to Mary would be like dying! She was unhinged, and for the first time, perhaps, in her life, her nerves were thoroughly out of order, and she was unreasonable to the bottom of her heart; and when she came to her young sister's gay announcement of what for *her* part she would do for her little nephew's education, and how she had been studying the subject ever since Mary's letter arrived, Mrs. Ochterlony felt 'as if she could have beaten the girl, and was ready to cry with wretchedness and irritation and despair. All these details served somehow to fix it, though she knew it had been fixed before. They told her the little room Hugh should have, and the old maid who would take care of him; and how he should play in the garden, and learn

his lessons in Aunt Agatha's parlour, and all those details which would be sweet to Mary when her boy was actually there. But at present they made his going away so real, that they were very bitter to her, and she had to draw the astonished child away from his play, and take hold of him and keep him by her, to feel quite sure that he was still here, and not in the little North-country cottage which she knew so well. But this was an arrangement which did not please the baby, who liked to have his mother all to himself, and pushed Hugh away, and kicked and screamed at him lustily. Thus it was an agitated little group upon which the Major looked down as he turned from his brother's pleasant letter. He was in a very pleasant frame of mind himself, and was excessively entertained by the self-assertion of little Wilfrid on his mother's knee.

"He is a plucky little soul, though he is so small," said Major Ochterlony; "but Willie, my boy, there's precious little for you of the grandeurs of the family. It is from Francis, my dear. It's very surprising, you know, but still it's true. And he sends you his love. You know I always said that there was a great deal of good in Francis; he is not a demonstrative man—but still, when you get at it, he has a

warm heart. I am sure he would be a good friend to you, Mary, if ever——"

"I hope I shall never need him to be a good friend to me," said Mrs. Ochterlony. "He is your brother, Hugh, but you know we never got on." It was a perfectly correct statement of fact, but yet, perhaps, Mary would not have made it, had she not been so much disturbed by Aunt Agatha's letter. She was almost disposed to persuade herself for that moment that she had not got on with Aunt Agatha, which was a moral impossibility. As for the Major, he took no notice of his wife's little ill-tempered unenthusiastic speech.

"You will be pleased when you read it," he said. "He talks of Hugh quite plainly as the heir of Earlston. I can't help being pleased. I wonder what kind of Squire the little beggar will make: but we shall not live to see that—or, at least, *I* shan't," the Major went on, and he looked at his boy with a wistful look which Mary used to think of afterwards. As for little Hugh, he was very indifferent, and not much more conscious of the affection near home than of the inheritance far off. Major Ochterlony stood by the side of Mary's chair, and he had it in his heart to give her a little lesson upon her unbelief and want of confidence in him, who

was always acting for the very best, and who thought much more of her interests than of his own.

"My darling," he said, in that coaxing tone which Mary knew so well, "I don't mean to blame you. It was a hard thing to make you do; and you might have thought me cruel and too precise. But only see now how important it was to be exact about our marriage—*too* exact even. If Hugh should come into the estate——"

Here Major Ochterlony stopped short all at once, without any apparent reason. He had still his brother's letter in his hand, and was standing by Mary's side; and nobody had come in, and nothing had happened. But all at once, like a flash of lightning, something of which he had never thought before had entered his mind. He stopped short, and said, "Good God!" low to himself, though he was not a man who used profane expressions. His face changed as a summer day changes when the wind seizes it like a ghost, and covers its heavens with clouds. So great was the shock he had received, that he made no attempt to hide it, but stood gazing at Mary, appealing to her out of the midst of his sudden trouble. "Good God!" he said. His eyes went in a piteous way from little Hugh,

who knew nothing about it, to his mother, who was at present the chief sufferer. Was it possible that instead of helping he had done his best to dishonour Hugh? It was so new an idea to him, that he looked helplessly into Mary's eyes to see if it was true. And she, for her part, had nothing to say to him. She gave a little tremulous cry which did but echo his own exclamation, and pitifully held out her hand to her husband. Yes; it was true. Between them they had sown thorns in their boy's path, and thrown doubt on his name, and brought humiliation and uncertainty into his future life. Major Ochterlony dropped into a chair by his wife's side, and covered his face with her hand. He was struck dumb by his discovery. It was only she who had seen it all long ago—to whom no sudden revelation could come—who had been suffering, even angrily and bitterly, but who was now altogether subdued and conscious only of a common calamity; who was the only one capable of speech or thought.

"Hugh, it is done now," said Mary; "perhaps it may never do him any harm. We are in India, a long way from all our friends. They know what took place in Scotland, but they can't know what happened here."

The Major only replied once more, "Good

God!" Perhaps he was not thinking so much of Hugh as of the failure he had himself made. To think he should have landed in the most apparent folly by way of being wise—that perhaps was the immediate sting. But as for Mrs. Ochterlony, her heart was full of her little boy who was going away from her, and her husband's horror and dismay seemed only natural. She had to withdraw her hand from him, for the tyrant baby did not approve of any other claim upon her attention, but she caressed his stooping head as she did so. "Oh, Hugh, let us hope things will turn out better than we think," she said, with her heart overflowing in her eyes; and the soft tears fell on Wilfrid's little frock as she soothed and consoled him. Little Hugh for his part had been startled in the midst of his play, and had come forward to see what was going on. He was not particularly interested, it is true, but still he rather wanted to know what it was all about. And when the pugnacious baby saw his brother he returned to the conflict. It was his baby efforts with hands and feet to thrust Hugh away which roused the Major. He got up and took a walk about the room, sighing heavily. "When you saw what was involved, why did you let me do it, Mary?"

he said, amid his sighs. That was all the advantage his wife had from his discovery. He was still walking about the room and sighing, when the baby went to sleep, and Hugh was taken away; and then to be sure the father and mother were alone.

"*That* never came into my head," Major Ochterlony said, drawing a chair again to Mary's side. "When you saw the danger why did you not tell me? I thought it was only because you did not like it. And then, on the other side, if anything happened to me—— Why did you let me do it when you saw that?" said the Major, almost angrily. And he drew another long impatient sigh.

"Perhaps it will do no harm, after all," said Mary, who felt herself suddenly put upon her defence.

"Harm! it is sure to do harm," said the Major. "It is as good as saying we were never married till now. Good heavens! to think you should have seen all that, and yet let me do it. We may have ruined him, for all we know. And the question is, what's to be done? Perhaps I should write to Francis, and tell him that I thought it best for your sake, in case anything happened to me——and as it was merely a

matter of form, I don't see that Churchill could have any hesitation in striking it out of the register——"

"Oh, Hugh, let it alone now," said Mrs. Ochterlony. "It is done, and we cannot undo it. Let us only be quiet and make no more commotion. People may forget it, perhaps, if we forget it."

"Forget it!" the Major said, and sighed. He shook his head, and at the same time he looked with a certain tender patronage on Mary. "You may forget it, my dear, and I hope you will," he said, with a magnanimous pathos; "but it is too much to expect that I should forget what may have such important results. I feel sure I ought to let Francis know. I daresay he could advise us what would be best. It is a very kind letter," said the Major; and he sighed, and gave Mary Mr. Ochterlony's brief and unimportant note with an air of resigned yet hopeless affliction, which half irritated her, and half awoke those possibilities of laughter which come "when there is little laughing in one's head," as we say in Scotland. She could have laughed, and she could have stormed at him; and yet in the midst of all she felt a poignant sense of contrast, and knew that it was she and not he who would really suffer —as it was he and not she who was in fault.

While Mary read Mr. Ochterlony's letter, lulling now and then with a soft movement the baby on her knee, the Major at the other side got attracted after a while by the pretty picture of the sleeping child, and began at length to forego his sighing, and to smoothe out the long white drapery that lay over Mary's dress. He was thinking no harm, the tender-hearted man. He looked at little Wilfrid's small waxen face pillowed on his mother's arm—so much smaller and feebler than Hugh and Islay had been, the great, gallant fellows—and his heart was touched by his little child. "My little man! *you* are all right, at least," said the inconsiderate father. He said it to himself, and thought, if he thought at all on the subject, that Mary, who was reading his brother's letter, did not hear him. And when Mrs. Ochterlony gave that cry which roused all the house and brought everybody trooping to the door, in the full idea that it must be a cobra at least, the Major jumped up to his feet as much startled as any of them, and looked down to the floor and cried, "Where—what is it?" with as little an idea of what was the matter as the ayah who grinned and gazed in the distance. When he saw that instead of indicating somewhere a reptile intruder, Mary had dropped the letter

and fallen into a weak outburst of tears, the Major was confounded. He sent the servants away, and took his wife in his arms and held her fast. "What is it, my love?" said the Major. "Are you ill? For Heaven's sake tell me what it is; my poor darling, my bonnie Mary!" This was how he soothed her, without the most distant idea what was the matter, or what had made her cry out. And when Mary came to herself, she did not explain very clearly. She said to herself that it was no use making him unhappy by the fantastical horror which had come into her mind with his words, or indeed had been already lurking there. And, poor soul, she was better when she had had her cry out, and had given over little Wilfrid, woke up by the sound, to his nurse's hands. She said, "Never mind me, Hugh; I am nervous, I suppose;" and cried on his shoulder as he never remembered her to have cried, except for very serious griefs. And when at last he had made her lie down, which was the Major's favourite panacea for all female ills of body or mind, and had covered her over, and patted and caressed and kissed her, Major Ochterlony went out with a troubled mind. It could not be anything in Francis's letter, which was a model of brotherly correctness, that had vexed

or excited her: and then he began to think that for some time past her health had not been what it used to be. The idea disturbed him greatly, as may be supposed; for the thought of Mary ailing and weakly, or perhaps ill and in danger, was one which had never yet entered his mind. The first thing he thought of was to go and have a talk with Sorbette, who ought to know, if he was good for anything, what it was.

"I am sure I don't know in the least what is the matter," the Major said. "She is not ill, you know. This morning she looked as well as ever she did, and then all at once gave a cry and burst into tears. It is so unlike Mary."

"It is very unlike her," said the doctor. "Perhaps you were saying something that upset her nerves."

"Nerves!" said the Major, with calm pride. "My dear fellow, you know that Mary has no nerves; she never was one of that sort of women. To tell the truth, I don't think she has ever been quite herself since that stupid business, you know."

"What stupid business?" said Mr. Sorbette.

"Oh, you know—the marriage, to be sure. A man looks very silly afterwards," said the

Major with candour, "when he lets himself be carried away by his feelings. She ought not to have consented when that was her idea. I would give a hundred pounds I had not been so foolish. I don't think she has ever been quite herself since."

The doctor had opened *de grands yeux.* He looked at his companion as if he could not believe his ears. "Of course you would never have taken such an unusual step if there had not been good reason for it," he ventured to say, which was rather a hazardous speech; for the Major might have divined its actual meaning, and then things would have gone badly with Mr. Sorbette. But, as it happened, Major Ochterlony was far too much occupied to pay attention to anybody's meaning except his own.

"Yes, there was good reason," he said. "She lost her marriage 'lines,' you know; and all our witnesses are dead. I thought she might perhaps find herself in a disagreeable position if anything happened to me."

As he spoke, the doctor regarded him with surprise so profound as to be half sublime—surprise and a perplexity and doubt wonderful to behold. Was this a story the Major had made up, or was it perhaps after all the certain truth? It was just what he had said at first;

but the first time it was stated with more warmth, and did not produce the same effect. Mr. Sorbette respected Mrs. Ochterlony to the bottom of his heart; but still he had shaken his head, and said, "There was no accounting for those things." And now he did not know what to make of it: whether to believe in the innocence of the couple, or to think the Major had made up a story—which, to be sure, would be by much the greatest miracle of all.

"If that was the case, I think it would have been better to let well alone," said the doctor. "That is what I would have done had it been me."

"Then why did not you tell me so?" said Major Ochterlony. "I asked you before; and what you all said to me was, 'If that's the case, best to repeat it at once.' Good Lord! to think how little one can rely upon one's friends when one asks their advice. But in the meantime the question is about Mary. I wish you'd go and see her and give her something—a tonic, you know, or something strengthening. I think I'll step over and see Churchill, and get him to strike that unfortunate piece of nonsense out of the register. As it was only a piece of form, I should think he would do it; and if it is *that* that ails her, it would do her good."

"If I were you, I'd let well alone," said the doctor; but he said it low, and he was putting on his hat as he spoke, and went off immediately to see his patient. Even if curiosity and surprise had not been in operation, he would still probably have hastened to Madonna Mary. For the regiment loved her in its heart, and the loss of her fair serene presence would have made a terrible gap at the station. "We must not let her be ill if we can help it," Mr. Sorbette said to himself; and then he made a private reflection about that ass Ochterlony and his fidgets. But yet, notwithstanding all his faults, the Major was not an ass. On thinking it over again, he decided not to go to Churchill with that little request about the register; and he felt more and more, the more he reflected upon it, how hard it was that in a moment of real emergency a man should be able to put so little dependence upon his friends. Even Mary had let him do it, though she had seen how dangerous and impolitic it was; and all the others had let him do it; for certainly it was not without asking advice that he had taken what the doctor called so unusual a step. Major Ochterlony felt as he took this into consideration that he was an injured man. What was the good of being on intimate terms with so many people if not one

of them could give him the real counsel of a friend when he wanted it? And even Mary had let him do it! The thought of such a strange dereliction of duty on the part of everybody connected with him, went to the Major's heart.

As for Mary, it would be a little difficult to express her feelings. She got up as soon as her husband was gone, and threw off the light covering he had put over her so carefully, and went back to her work; for to lie still in a darkened room was not a remedy in which she put any faith. And to tell the truth, poor Mary's heart was eased a little, perhaps physically, by her tears, which had done her good, and by the other incidents of the evening, which had thrown down as it were the separation between her and her husband, and taken away the one rankling and aching wound she had. Now that he saw that he had done wrong—now that he was aware that it was a wrong step he had taken—a certain remnant of bitterness which had been lurking in a corner of Mary's heart came all to nothing and died down in a moment. As soon as he was himself awakened to it, Mary forgot her own wound and every evil thought she had ever had, in her sorrow for him. She remembered his look of dismay, his dead silence, his

unusual exclamation; and she said, "poor Hugh!" in her heart, and was ready to condone his worst faults. *Otherwise,* as Mrs. Ochterlony said to herself, he had scarcely a fault that anybody could point out. He was the kindest, the most true and tender! Everybody acknowledged that he was the best husband in the regiment, and which of them could stand beside him, even in an inferior place? Not Colonel Kirkman, who might have been a petrified Colonel out of the Drift (if there were Colonels in those days), for any particular internal evidence to the contrary; nor Captain Hesketh, who was so well off; nor any half dozen of the other officers. This was the state of mind in which Mrs. Ochterlony was when the doctor called. And he found her quite well, and thought her an unaccountable woman, and shrugged his shoulders, and wondered what the Major would take into his head next. "He said it was on the nerves, as the poor women call it," said the doctor, transferring his own suggestion to Major Ochterlony. "I should like to know what he means by making game of people—as if I had as much time to talk nonsense as he has: but I thought, to be sure, when he said that, that it was a cock-and-bull story. I ought to know something about your nerves."

"He was quite right," said Mrs. Ochterlony; and she smiled and took hold of the great trouble that was approaching her and made a buckler of it for her husband. "My nerves were very much upset. You know we have to make up our minds to send Hugh home."

And as she spoke she looked up at Mr. Sorbette with eyes brimming over with two great tears—real tears, Heaven knows, which came but too readily to back up her sacred plea. The doctor recoiled before them as if somebody had levelled a pistol at him; for he was a man that could not bear to see women crying, as he said, or to see anybody in distress, which was the true statement of the case.

"There—there," he said, "don't excite yourself. What is the good of thinking about it? Everybody has to do it, and the monkeys get on as well as possible. Look here, pack up all this work and trash, and amuse yourself. Why don't you go out more, and take a little relaxation? You had better send over to my sister for a novel; or if there's nothing else for it, get the baby. Don't sit working and driving yourself crazy here."

So that was all Mr. Sorbette could do in the case; and a wonderfully puzzled doctor he was as he went back to his quarters, and took the first

opportunity of telling his sister that she was all wrong about the Ochterlonys, and he always knew she was. "As if a man could know anything about it," Miss Sorbette said. And in the meantime the Major went home, and was very tender of Mary, and petted and watched over her as if she had had a real illness. Though, after all, the question why she had let him do so, was often nearly on his lips, as it was always in his heart.

CHAPTER VIII.

WHAT Mrs. Ochterlony had to do after this was to write to Aunt Agatha, settling everything about little Hugh, which was by no means an easy thing to do, especially since the matter had been complicated by that most unnecessary suggestion about Islay, which Mrs. Hesketh had thought proper to make; as if she, who had a grown-up daughter to be her companion, and swarms of children, so many as almost to pass the bounds of possible recollection, could know anything about how it felt to send off one's entire family, leaving only a baby behind; but then that is so often the way with those well-off people, who have never had anything happen to them. Mary had to write that if all was well, and they could find "an opportunity," probably Hugh would be sent by the next mail but one; for she succeeded in persuad-

ing herself and the Major that sooner than that it would be impossible to have his things ready. "You do not say anything about Islay, my dear," said the Major, when he read the letter, "and you must see that for the child's sake——"

"Oh, Hugh, what difference can it make?" said Mrs. Ochterlony, with conscious sophistry. "If she can take one child, she can take two. It is not like a man—" But whether it was Islay or Aunt Agatha who was not like a man, Mary did not explain; and she went on with her preparations with a desperate trust in circumstances, such as women are often driven to. Something might happen to preserve to her yet for a little while longer her three-year-old boy. Hugh was past hoping for, but it seemed to her now that she would accept with gratitude, as a mitigated calamity, the separation from one which had seemed so terrible to her at first. As for the Major, he adhered to the idea with a tenacity unusual to him. He even came and superintended her at the work-table, and asked continually, How about Islay? if all these things were for Hugh?—which was a question that called forth all the power of sophistry and equivocation which Mrs. Ochterlony possessed to answer. But still she put a certain trust in

circumstances that something might still happen to save Islay — and indeed something did happen, though far, very far, from being as Mary wished.

The Major in the meantime had done his best to shake himself free from the alarm and dismay indirectly produced in his mind by his brother's letter. He had gone to Mr. Churchill after all, but found it impracticable to get the entry blotted out of the register, notwithstanding his assurance that it was simply a matter of form. Mr. Churchill had no doubt on that point, but he could not alter the record, though he condoled with the sufferer. "I cannot think how you all could let me do it," the Major said. "A man may be excused for taking the alarm, if he is persuaded that his wife will get into trouble when he is gone, for want of a formality; but how all of you, with cool heads and no excitement to take away your judgment——"

"Who persuaded you?" said the clergyman, with a little dismay.

"Well, you know Kirkman said things looked very bad in Scotland when the marriage lines were lost. How could I tell? he is Scotch, and he ought to know. And then to think of Mary in trouble, and perhaps losing her little provision if anything happened to me. It was

enough to make a man do anything foolish; but how all of you who know better should have let me do it——"

"My dear Major," said Mr. Churchill mildly, "I don't think you are a man to be kept from doing anything when your heart is set upon it;—and then you were in such a hurry——"

"Ah, yes," said Major Ochterlony with a deep sigh; "and nobody, that I can remember, ever suggested to me to wait a little. That's what it is, Churchill; to have so many friends, and not one among them who would take the trouble to tell a man he was wrong."

"Major Ochterlony," said the clergyman, a little stiffly, "you forget that I said everything I could say to convince you. Of course I did not know all the circumstances—but I hope I shall always have courage enough, when I think so, to tell any man he is in the wrong."

"My dear fellow, I did not mean you," said the Major, with another sigh; and perhaps it was with a similar statement that the conversation always concluded when Major Ochterlony confided to any special individual of his daily associates, this general condemnation of his friends, of which he made as little a secret as he had made of his re-marriage. The station knew as well after that, that Major Ochterlony was greatly

disturbed about the "unusual step" he had taken, and was afraid it might be bad for little Hugh's future prospects, as it had been aware beforehand of the wonderful event itself. And naturally there was a great deal of discussion on the subject. There were some people who contented themselves with thinking, like the doctor, that Ochterlony was an ass with his fidgets; while there were others who thought he was "deep," and was trying, as they said, to do away with the bad impression. The former class were men, and the latter were women; but it was by no means all the women who thought so. Not to speak of the younger class, like poor little Mrs. Askell, there were at least two of the most important voices at the station which did not declare themselves. Mrs. Kirkman shook her head, and hoped that however it turned out it might be for all their good, and above all might convince Mary of the error of her ways; and Mrs. Hesketh thought everybody made a great deal too much fuss about it, and begged the public in general to let the Ochterlonys alone. But the fact was, that so far as the ordinary members of society were concerned, the Major's new agitation revived the gossip that had nearly died out, and set it all afloat again. It had been dying away under the mingled influences of time, and the non-action of the leading

ladies, and Mrs. Ochterlony's serene demeanour, which forbade the idea of evil. But when it was thus started again the second time, it was less likely to be made an end of. Mary, however, was as unconscious of the renewed commotion as if she had been a thousand miles away. The bitterness had gone out of her heart, and she had half begun to think as the Major did, that he was an injured man, and that it was her fault and his friends' fault; and then she was occupied with something still more important, and could not go back to the old pain, from which she had suffered enough. Thus it was with her in those troubled, but yet, as she afterwards thought, happy days; when she was very miserable sometimes and very glad—when she had a great deal, as people said, to put up with, a great deal to forgive, and many a thing of which she did not herself approve, to excuse and justify to others; this was her condition, and she had at the same time before her the dreadful probability of separation from both of her children, the certainty of a separation, and a long, dangerous voyage for one of them, and sat and worked to this end day after day, with a sense of what at the moment seemed exquisite wretchedness. But yet, thinking over it afterwards, and looking back upon it, it seemed to Mary as if those were happy days.

The time was coming very near when Hugh (as Mrs. Ochterlony said), or the children (as the Major was accustomed to say) were going home; when all at once, without any preparation, very startling news came to the station. One of the little local rebellions that are always taking place in India had broken out somewhere, and a strong detachment of the regiment was to be sent immediately to quell it. Major Ochterlony came home that day a little excited by the news, and still more by the certainty that it was he who must take the command. He was excited because he was a soldier at heart, and liked, kind man as he was, to see something doing; and because active service was more hopeful, and exhilarating, and profitable, than reposing at the station, where there was no danger, and very little to do. "I don't venture to hope that the rogues will show fight," he said cheerfully; "so there is no need to be anxious, Mary; and you can keep the boys with you till I come back—that is only fair," he said, in his exultation. As for Mary, the announcement took all the colour out of her cheeks, and drove both Hugh and Islay out of her mind. He had seen service enough, it is true, since they were married, to habituate her to that sort of thing; and she had made, on the whole, a very good soldier's wife, bearing her anxiety in silence,

and keeping a brave front to the world. But perhaps Mr. Sorbette was right when he thought her nerves were upset. So many things all coming together may have been too much for her. When she heard of this she broke down altogether, and felt a cold thrill of terror go through her from her head to her heart, or from her heart to her head, which perhaps would be the most just expression; but she dared not say a word to her husband to deter or discourage him. When he saw the two tears that sprang into her eyes, and the sudden paleness that came over her face, he kissed her, all flushed and smiling as he was, and said: "Now, don't be silly, Mary. Don't forget you are a soldier's wife." There was not a touch of despondency or foreboding about him; and what could she say who knew, had there been ever so much foreboding, that his duty was the thing to be thought of, and not anybody's feelings? Her cheek did not regain its colour all that day, but she kept it to herself, and forgot even about little Hugh's reprieve. The children were dear, but their father was dearer, or at least so it seemed at that moment. Perhaps if the lives of the little ones had been threatened, the Major's expedition might have bulked smaller—for the heart can hold only one overwhelming emotion at a time. But the affair was urgent,

and Mary did not have very much time left to her to think of it. Almost before she had realized what it was, the drums had beat, and the brisk music of the band—that music that people called exhilarating—had roused all the station, and the measured march of the men had sounded past, as if they were all treading upon her heart. The Major kissed his little boys in their beds, for it was, to be sure, unnaturally early, as everything is in India; and he had made his wife promise to go and lie down, and take care of herself, when he was gone. "Have the baby, and don't think any more of me than you can help, and take care of my boys. We shall be back sooner than you want us," the Major had said, as he took tender leave of his "bonnie Mary." And for her part, she stood as long as she could see them, with her two white lips pressed tight together, waving her hand to her soldier till he was gone out of sight. And then she obeyed him, and lay down and covered her head, and sobbed to herself in the growing light, as the big blazing sun began to touch the horizon. She was sick with pain and terror, and she could not tell why. She had watched him go away before, and had hailed him coming back again, and had known him in hotter conflict than this could be, and wounded, and yet he had taken no great harm. But all that did

her little good now; perhaps because her nerves were weaker than usual, from the repeated shocks she had had to bear.

And it was to be expected that Mrs. Kirkman would come to see her, to console her that morning, and put the worst thoughts into her head. But before even Mrs. Kirkman, little Emma Askell came rushing in, with her baby and a bundle, and threw herself at Mary's feet. The Ensign had gone to the wars, and it was the first experience of such a kind that had fallen to the lot of his little baby-wife; and naturally her anxiety told more distinctly upon her than it did upon Mary's ripe soul and frame. The poor little thing was white and cold and shivering, notwithstanding the blazing Indian day that began to lift itself over their heads. She fell down at Mary's feet, forgetting all about the beetles and scorpions which were the horror of her ordinary existence, and clasped her knees, and held Mrs. Ochterlony fast, grasping the bundle and the little waxen baby at the same time in the other arm.

"Do you think they will ever come back?" said poor little Emma. "Oh, Mrs. Ochterlony, tell me. I can bear it if you will tell me the worst. If anything were to happen to Charlie, and me not with him! I never, never, never

can live until the news comes. Oh, tell me, do you think they will ever come back?"

"If I did not think they would come back, do you think I could take it so quietly?" said Mary, and she smiled as best she could, and lifted up the poor little girl, and took from her the baby and the bundle, which seemed all one, so closely were they held. Mrs. Ochterlony had deep eyes, which did not show when she had been crying; and she was not young enough to cry in thunder showers, as Emma Askell at eighteen might still be permitted to do; and the very sight of her soothed the young creature's heart. "You know you are a soldier's wife," Mary said; "I think I was as bad as you are the first time the Major left me—but we all get used to it after a few years."

"And he came back?" said Emma, doing all she could to choke a sob.

"He must have come back, or I should not have parted with him this morning," said Mrs. Ochterlony, who had need of all her own strength just at that moment. "Let us see in the meantime what this bundle is, and why you have brought poor baby out in her night-gown. And what a jewel she is to sleep! When my little Willy gets disturbed," said Mary, with a sigh, "he gives none of us any rest. I will make up a

bed for her here on the sofa; and now tell me what this bundle is for, and why you have rushed out half dressed. We'll talk about *them* presently. Tell me first about yourself."

Upon which Emma hung down her pretty little head, and began to fold a hem upon her damp handkerchief, and did not know how to explain herself. "Don't be angry with me," she said. "Oh, my Madonna, let me come and stay with you!—that was what I meant; I can't stay there by myself—and I will nurse Willy, and do your hair and help sewing. I don't mind what I do. Oh, Mrs. Ochterlony, don't send me away! I should die if I were alone. And as for baby, she never troubles anybody. She is so good. I will be your little servant, and wait upon you like a slave, if you will only let me stay."

It would be vain to say that Mrs. Ochterlony was pleased by this appeal, for she was herself in a very critical state of mind, full of fears that she could give no reason for, and a hundred fantastic pains which she would fain have hidden from human sight. She had been taking a little comfort in the thought of the solitude, the freedom from visitors and disturbance, that she might safely reckon on, and in which she thought her mind might perhaps recover a little; and

this young creature's society was not specially agreeable to her. But she was touched by the looks of the forlorn girl, and could no more have sent her away than she could repress the little movement of impatience and half disgust that rose in her heart. She was not capable of giving her any effusive welcome; but she kissed poor little Emma, and put the bundle beside the baby on the sofa, and accepted her visitor without saying anything about it. Perhaps it did her no harm: though she felt by moments as if her impatient longing to be alone and silent, and free to think her own thoughts, would break out in spite of all her self-control. But little Mrs. Askell never suspected the existence of any such emotions. She thought, on the contrary, that it was because Mary was used to it that she took it so quietly, and wondered whether *she* would ever get used to it. Perhaps, on the whole, Emma hoped not. She thought to herself that Mrs. Ochterlony, who was so little disturbed by the parting, would not feel the joy of the return half so much as she should; and on these terms she preferred to take the despair along with the joy. But under the shadow of Mary's matronly presence the little thing cheered up, and got back her courage. After she had been comforted with tea, and had fully realized her position as

Mrs. Ochterlony's visitor, Emma's spirits rose. She was half or quarter Irish, as has been already mentioned, and behaved herself accordingly. She recollected her despair, it is true, in the midst of a game with Hugh and Islay, and cried a little, but soon comforted herself with the thought that at that moment her Charlie could be in no danger. "They'll be stopping somewhere for breakfast by a well, and camping all about, and they can't get any harm there," said Emma; and thus she kept chattering all day. If she had chattered only, and been content with chattering, it would have been comparatively easy work; but then she was one of those people who require answers, and will be spoken to. And Mary had to listen and reply, and give her opinion where they would be now, and when, at the very earliest, they might be expected back. With such a discipline to undergo, it may be thought a supererogation to bring Mrs. Kirkman in upon her that same morning with her handkerchief in her hand, prepared, if it were necessary, to weep with Mary. But still it is the case that Mrs. Kirkman did come, as might have been expected; and to pass over conversation so edifying as hers, would, under such circumstances, be almost a crime.

"My dear Mary," Mrs. Kirkman said when

she came in, "I am so glad to see you up and making an effort; it is so much better than giving way. We must accept these trials as something sent us for our good. I am sure the Major has all our prayers for his safe return. Oh, Mary, do you not remember what I said to you—that God, I was sure, was not going to let you alone?"

"I never thought He would leave me alone," said Mrs. Ochterlony; but certainly, though it was a right enough sentiment, it was not uttered in a right tone of voice.

"He will not rest till you see your duty more clearly," said her visitor; "if it were not for that, why should He have sent you so many things one after another? It is far better and more blessed than if He had made you happy and comfortable as the carnal heart desires. But I did not see you had any one with you," said Mrs. Kirkman, stopping short at the sight of Emma, who had just come into the room.

"Poor child, she was frightened and unhappy, and came to me this morning," said Mary. "She will stay with me—till—they come home."

"Let us say *if* they come home," said Mrs. Kirkman, solemnly. "I never like to be too certain. We know when they go forth, but who

can tell when they will come back. That is in God's hands."

At this speech Emma fell trembling and shivering again, and begged Mrs. Kirkman to tell her the worst, and cried out that she could bear it. She thought of nothing but her Charlie, as was natural, and that the Colonel's wife had already heard some bad news. And Mrs. Kirkman thought of nothing but improving the occasion; and both of them were equally indifferent, and indeed unaware of the cold shudder which went through Mary, and the awful foreboding that closed down upon her, putting out the sunshine. It was a little safeguard to her to support the shivering girl who already half believed herself a widow, and to take up the challenge of the spiritual teacher who felt herself responsible for their souls.

"Do not make Emma think something is wrong," she said. "It is so easy to make a young creature wretched with a word. If the Colonel had been with them, it might have been different. But it is easy just now for you to frighten us. I am sure you do not mean it." And then Mary had to whisper in the young wife's ear, "She knows nothing about them—it is only her way," which was a thing very easily

said to Emma, but very difficult to establish herself upon in her own heart.

And then Mrs. Hesketh came in to join the party.

"So they are gone," the new comer said. "What a way little Emma is in, to be sure. Is it the first time he has ever left you, my dear? and I daresay they have been saying something dreadful to frighten you. It is a great shame to let girls marry so young. I have been reckoning," said the easy-minded woman, whose husband was also of the party, "how long they are likely to be. If they get to Amberabad, say to-morrow, and if there is nothing very serious, and all goes well, you know, they might be back here on Saturday—and we had an engagement for Saturday," Mrs. Hesketh said. Her voice was quite easy and pleasant, as it always was; but nevertheless, Mary knew that if she had not felt excited, she would not have paid such an early morning visit, and that even her confident calculation about the return proved she was in a little anxiety about it. The fact was, that none of them were quite at their ease, except Mrs. Kirkman, who, having no personal interest in the matter, was quite equal to taking a very gloomy view of affairs.

"How can any one think of such vanities at such a moment?" Mrs. Kirkman said. "Oh, if I only could convince you, my dear friends. None of us can tell what sort of engagement they may have before next Saturday—perhaps the most solemn engagement ever given to man. Don't let misfortune find you in this unprepared state of mind. There is nothing on earth so solemn as seeing soldiers go away. You may think of the band and all that, but for me, I always seem to hear a voice saying, 'Prepare to meet your God.'"

To be sure the Colonel was in command of the station and was safe at home, and his wife could speculate calmly upon the probable fate of the detachment. But as for the three women who were listening to her, it was not so easy for them. There was a dreadful pause, for nobody could contradict such a speech; and poor little Emma dropped down sobbing on the floor; and the colour forsook even Mrs. Hesketh's comely cheek; and as for Mary, though she could not well be paler, her heart seemed to contract and shrink within her; and none of them had the courage to say anything. Naturally Mrs. Hesketh, with whom it was a principle not to fret, was the first to recover her voice.

"After all, though it's always an anxious time,

I don't see any particular reason we have to be uneasy," she said. "Hesketh told me he felt sure they would give in at once. It may be very true all you say, but at the same time we may be reasonable, you know, and not take fright when there is no cause for it. Don't cry, Emma, you little goose; you'll have him back again in two or three days, all right."

And after awhile the anxious little assembly broke up, and Mrs. Hesketh, who though she was very liberal in her way, was not much given to personal charities, went to see some of the soldiers' wives, who, poor souls, would have been just as anxious if they had had the time for it, and gave them the best advice about their children, and promised tea and sugar if they would come to fetch it, and old frocks, in which she was always rich; and these women were so ungrateful as to like her visit better than that of the Colonel's wife, who carried them always on her heart and did them a great deal of good, and never confined herself to kindnesses of impulse. And little Emma Askell cried herself to sleep sitting on the floor, notwithstanding the beetles, reposing her pretty face flushed with weeping and her swollen eyes upon the sofa, where Mary sat and watched over her. Mrs. Hesketh got a little ease out of her visit to the soldiers' wives,

and Emma forgot her troubles in sleep; but no sort of relief came to Mary, who reasoned with herself all day long without being able to deliver herself from the pressure of the deadly cold hand that seemed to have been laid upon her heart.

CHAPTER IX.

AND Mary's forebodings came true. Though it was so unlikely, and indeed seemed so unreasonable to everybody who knew about such expeditions, instead of bringing back his men victorious, it was the men, all drooping and discouraged, who carried back the brave and tender Major, covered over with the flag he had died for. The whole station was overcast with mourning when that melancholy procession came back. Mr. Churchill, who met them coming in, hurried back with his heart swelling up into his throat to prepare Mrs. Ochterlony for what was coming; but Mary was the only creature at the station who did not need to be prepared. She knew it was going to be so when she saw him go away. She felt in her heart that this was to be the end of it from the moment when he first told her of the expedition on which he

was ordered. And when she saw poor Mr. Churchill's face, from which he had vainly tried to banish the traces of the horrible shock he had just received, she saw that the blow had fallen. She came up to him and took hold of his hands, and said, "I know what it is;" and almost felt, in the strange and terrible excitement of the moment, as if she were sorry for him who felt it so much.

This was how it was, and all the station was struck with mourning. A chance bullet, which most likely had been fired without any purpose at all, had done its appointed office in Major Ochterlony's brave, tender, honest bosom. Though he had been foolish enough by times, nobody now thought of that to his disadvantage. Rather, if anything, it surrounded him with a more affectionate regret. A dozen wise men might have perished and not left such a gap behind them as the Major did, who had been good to everybody in his restless way, and given a great deal of trouble, and made up for it, as only a man with a good heart and natural gift of friendliness could do. He had worried his men many a time as the Colonel never did, for example: but then, to Major Ochterlony they were men and fine fellows, while they were only machines, like himself, to Colonel Kirkman;

and more than one critic in regimentals was known to say with a sigh, "If it had only been the Colonel." But it was only the fated man who had been so over-careful about his wife's fate in case anything happened to him. Young Askell came by stealth like a robber to take his little wife out of the house where Mary was not capable any longer of her society; and Captain Hesketh too had come back all safe—all of them except the one: and the women in their minds stood round Mary in a kind of hushed circle, looking with an awful fellow-feeling and almost self-reproach at the widowhood which might have, but had not, fallen upon themselves. It was no fault of theirs that she had to bear the cross for all of them as it were; and yet their hearts ached over her, as if somehow they had purchased their own exemption at her expense. When the first dark moment, during which nobody saw Madonna Mary—a sweet title which had come back to all their lips in the hour of trouble—was over, they took turns to be with her, those grieved and compunctious women—compunctious not so much because at one time in thought they had dōne her wrong, as because now they were happy and she was sorrowful. And thus passed over a time that cannot be described in a book, or at least in such a book as this.

Mary had to separate herself, with still the bloom of her life unimpaired, from all the fair company of matrons round her; to put the widow's veil over the golden reflections in her hair, and the faint colour that came faintly back to her cheek by imprescriptible right of her health and comparative youth, and to go away out of the high-road of life where she had been wayfaring in trouble and in happiness, to one of those humble by-ways where the feeble and broken take shelter. Heaven knows she did not think of that. All that she thought of was her dead soldier who had gone away in the bloom of *his* days to the unknown darkness which God alone knows the secrets of, who had left all his comrades uninjured and at peace behind him, and had himself been the only one to answer for that enterprize with his life. It is strange to see this wonderful selection going on in the world, even when one has no immediate part in it; but stranger, far stranger, to wake up from one's musings and feel all at once that it is one's self whom God has laid his hand upon for this stern purpose. The wounded creature may writhe upon the sword, but it is of no use; and again as ever, those who are not wounded—those perhaps for whose instruction the spectacle is made—draw round in a hushed circle and look

on. Mary Ochterlony was a dutiful woman, obedient and submissive to God's will; and she gave no occasion to that circle of spectators to break up the hush and awe of natural sympathy and criticise her how she bore it. But after a while she came to perceive, what everybody comes to perceive who has been in such a position, that the sympathy had changed its character. That was natural too. How a man bears death and suffering of body, has long been one of the favourite objects of primitive human curiosity; and to see how anguish and sorrow affect the mind is a study as exciting and still more interesting. It was this that roused Mrs. Ochterlony out of her first stupor, and made her decide so soon as she did upon her journey home.

All these events had passed in so short a time, that there were many people who on waking up in the morning, and recollecting that Mary and her children were going next day, could scarcely realize that the fact was possible, or that it could be true about the Major, who had so fully intended sending his little boys home by that same mail. But it is, on the whole, astonishing how soon and how calmly a death is accepted by the general community; and even the people who asked themselves could this change really have happened in so short a time,

took pains an hour or two after to make up little parcels for friends at home, which Mary was to carry; bits of Oriental embroidery and filagree ornaments, and little portraits of the children, and other trifles that were not important enough to warrant an Overland parcel, or big enough to go by the Cape. Mary was very kind in that way, they all said. She accepted all kinds of commissions, perhaps without knowing very well what she was doing, and promised to go and see people whom she had no likelihood of ever going to see; the truth was, that she heard and saw and understood only partially, sometimes rousing up for a moment and catching one word or one little incident with the intensest distinctness, and then relapsing back again into herself. She did not quite make out what Emma Askell was saying the last time her little friend came to see her. Mary was packing her boys' things at the moment, and much occupied with a host of cares, and what she heard was only a stream of talk, broken with the occasional burden which came in like a chorus "when you see mamma."

"When I see mamma?" said Mary, with a little surprise.

"Dear Mrs. Ochterlony, you said you would perhaps go to see her—in St. John's Wood,"

said Emma, with tears of vexation in her eyes; "you know I told you all about it. The Laburnums, Acacia-road. And she will be so glad to see you. I explained it all, and you said you would go. I told her how kind you had been to me, and how you let me stay with you when I was so anxious about Charlie. Oh, dear Mrs. Ochterlony, forgive me! I did not mean to bring it back to your mind."

"No," said Mary, with a kind of forlorn amusement. It seemed so strange, almost droll, that they should think any of their poor little passing words would bring that back to her which was never once out of her mind, nor other than the centre of all her thoughts. "I must have been dreaming when I said so, Emma; but if I have promised, I will try to go—I have nothing to do in London, you know—I am going to the North-country, among my own people," which was an easier form of expression than to say, as they all did, that she was going home.

"But everybody goes to London," insisted Emma; and it was only when Mr. Churchill came in, also with a little packet, that the ensign's wife was silenced. Mr. Churchill's parcel was for his mother who lived in Yorkshire, naturally, as Mrs. Ochterlony was going to the

North, quite in her way. But the clergyman, for his part, had something more important to say. When Mrs. Askell was gone, he stopped Mary in her packing to speak to her seriously as he said, "You will forgive me and feel for me, I know," he said. "It is about your second marriage, Mrs. Ochterlony."

"Don't speak of it—oh, don't speak of it," Mary said, with an imploring tone that went to his heart.

"But I ought to speak of it—if you can bear it," said Mr. Churchill, "and I know for the boys' sake that you can bear everything. I have brought an extract from the register, if you would like to have it; and I have added below——"

"Mr. Churchill, you are very kind, but I don't want ever to think of that," said Mrs. Ochterlony. "I don't want to recollect now that such a thing ever took place—I wish all record of it would disappear from the face of the earth. Afterwards he thought the same," she said, hurriedly. Meanwhile Mr. Churchill stood with the paper half drawn from his pocket-book, watching the changes of her face.

"It shall be as you like," he said, slowly, "but only as I have written below——If you change your mind, you have only to write to

me, my dear Mrs. Ochterlony—if I stay here—and I am sure I don't know if I shall stay here; but in case I don't, you can always learn where I am, from my mother at that address."

"Do you think you will not stay here?" said Mary, whose heart was not so much absorbed in her own sorrows that she could not feel for the dismayed, desponding mind that made itself apparent in the poor clergyman's voice.

"I don't know," he said, in the dreary tones of a man who has little choice, "with our large family, and my wife's poor health. I shall miss you dreadfully—both of you: you can't think how cheery and hearty he always was—and that to a down-hearted man like me——"

And then Mary sat down and cried. It went to her heart and dispersed all her heaviness and stupor, and opened the great sealed fountains. And Mr. Churchill once more felt the climbing sorrow in his throat, and said in broken words, "Don't cry—God will take care of you. He knows why He has done it, though we don't; and He has given his own word to be a father to the boys."

That was all the poor priest could find it in his heart to say—but it was better than a sermon

—and he went away with the extract from the register still in his pocket-book and tears in his eyes; while for her part Mary finished her packing with a heart relieved by her tears. Ah, how cheery and hearty he had been, how kind to the down-hearted man; how different the stagnant quietness now from that cheerful commotion he used to make, and all the restless life about him; and then his favourite words seemed to come up about and surround her, flitting in the air with a sensation between acute torture and a dull happiness. His bonnie Mary! It was not any vanity on Mary's part that made her think above all of that name. Thus she did her packing and got ready for her voyage, and took the good people's commissions without knowing very well to what it was that she pledged herself; and it was the same mail—"the mail after next"—by which she had written to Aunt Agatha that Hugh was to be sent home.

They would all have come to see her off if they could have ventured to do it that last morning: but the men prevented it, who are good for something now and then in such cases. As it was, however, Mrs. Kirkman and Mrs. Hesketh and Emma Askell were there, and poor sick Mrs. Churchill, who had stolen from her bed in her dressing-gown to kiss Mary for the last time.

"Oh, my dear, if it had been me—oh, if it had only been me!—and you would all have been so good to the poor children," sobbed the poor clergyman's ailing wife. Yet it was not her, but the strong, brave, cheery Major, the prop and pillar of a house. As for Mrs. Kirkman, there never was a better proof that she was, as we have so often said, in spite of her talk, a good woman, than the fact that she could only cry helplessly over Mary, and had not a word to say. She had thought and prayed that God would not leave her friend alone, but she had not meant Him to go so far as this; and her heart ached and fluttered at the terrible notion that perhaps *she* had something to do with the striking of this blow. Mrs. Hesketh for her part packed every sort of dainties for the children in a basket, and strapped on a bundle of portable toys to amuse them on the journey, to one of Mrs. Ochterlony's boxes. "You will be glad of them before you get there," said the experienced woman, who had once made the journey with half-a-dozen, as she said, and knew what it was. And then one or two of the men were walking about outside in an accidental sort of way, to have a last look of Mary. It was considered a very great thing among them all when the doctor, who hated to see people in trouble, and disapproved of crying on principle,

made up his mind to go in and shake hands with Mrs. Ochterlony; but it was not *that* he went for, but to look at the baby, and give Mary a little case "with some sal volatile and so forth, and the quantities marked," he said, "not that you are one to want sal volatile. The little shaver there will be all right as soon as you get to England. Good-bye. Take care of yourself." And he wrung her hand and bolted out again like a flash of lightning. He said afterwards that the only sensible thing he knew of his sister, was that she did not go; and that the sight of all those women crying was enough to give a man a sunstroke, not to speak of the servants and the soldiers' wives who were howling at the back of the house.

Oh, what a change it was in so short a time, to go out of the Indian home, which had been a true home, with Mr. Churchill to take care of her and her poor babies, and set her face to the cold far-away world of her youth which she had forgotten, and which everybody called home by a kind of mockery; and where was Hugh, who had always taken such care of his own? Mary did not cry as people call crying, but now and then, two great big hot tears rolled out of the bitter fountain that was full to overflowing, and fell scalding on her hands, and gave her a momentary

sense of physical relief. Almost all the ladies of the station were ill after it all the day; but Mary could not afford to be ill; and Mr. Churchill was very kind, and went with her through all the first part of her journey over the cross roads, until she had come into the trunk road, where there was no more difficulty. He was very, very kind, and she was very grateful; but yet perhaps when you have had some one of your very own to do everything for you, who was not kind but did it by nature, it is better to take to doing it yourself *after*, than have even the best of friends to do it for kindness' sake. This was what Mary felt when the good man had gone sadly back to his sick wife and his uncertain lot. It was a kind of relief to her to be all alone, entirely alone with her children, for the ayah, to be sure, did not count—and to have everything to do; and this was how they came down mournfully to the sea-board, and to the big town which filled Hugh and Islay with childish excitement, and Mary bade an everlasting farewell to her life, to all that she had actually known as life—and got to sea, to go, as they said, home.

It would be quite useless for our purpose to go over the details of the voyage, which was like other voyages, bad and good by turns. When she was at sea, Mrs. Ochterlony had a little

leisure, and felt ill and weak and overworn, and was the better for it after. It took her mind for the moment off that unmeasured contemplation of her sorrow which is the soul of grief, and her spirit got a little strength in the interval of repose. She had been twelve years in India, and from eighteen to thirty is a wonderful leap in a life. She did not know how she was to find the things and the people of whom she had a girl's innocent recollection; nor how they, who had not changed, would appear to her changed eyes. Her own people were very kind, like everybody. Mary found a letter at Gibraltar from her brother-in-law, Francis, full of sympathy and friendly offers. He asked her to come to Earlston with her boys to see if they could not get on together. "Perhaps it might not do, but it would be worth a trial," Mr. Ochterlony sensibly said; and there was even a chance that Aunt Agatha, who was to have met with Hugh at Southampton, would come to meet her widowed niece, who might be supposed to stand still more in need of her good offices. Though indeed this was rather an addition to Mary's cares; for she thought the moment of landing would be bitter enough of itself, without the pain of meeting with some one who belonged to her, and yet did not belong to her, and who had

doubtless grown as much out of the Aunt Agatha of old as she had grown out of the little Mary. When Mrs. Ochterlony left the North-country, Aunt Agatha had been a middle-aged maiden lady, still pretty, though a little faded, with light hair growing grey, which makes a woman's countenance, already on the decline, more faded still, and does not bring out the tints as dark hair in the same powdery condition sometimes does. And at that time she was still occupied by a thought of possibilities which people who knew Agatha Seton from the time she was sixteen, had decided at that early period to be impossible. No doubt twelve years had changed this—and it must have made a still greater change upon the little sister whom Mary had known only at six years old, and who was now eighteen, the age she had herself been when she married; a grown-up young woman, and of a character more decided than Mary's had ever been.

A little stir of reviving life awoke in her and moved her, when the weary journey was over, and the steam-boat at length had reached Southampton, to go up to the deck and look from beneath the heavy pent-house of her widow's veil at the strangers who were coming —to see, as she said to herself, with a throb

at her heart, if there was anybody she knew. Aunt Agatha was not rich, and it was a long journey, and perhaps she had not come. Mary stood on the crowded deck, a little apart, with Hugh and Islay on each side of her, and the baby in his nurse's arms—a group such as is often seen on these decks—all clad with loss and mourning, coming "home" to a country in which perhaps they have no longer any home. Nobody came to claim Mrs. Ochterlony as she stood among her little children. She thought she would have been glad of that, but when it came to the moment—when she saw the cold unknown shore and the strange country, and not a Christian soul to say welcome, poor Mary's heart sank. She sat down, for her strength was failing her, and drew Hugh and Islay close to her, to keep her from breaking down altogether. And it was just at that moment that the brightest of young faces peered down under her veil and looked doubtfully, anxiously at her, and called out impatiently, "Aunt Agatha!" to some one at the other side, without speaking to Mary. Mrs. Ochterlony did not hear this newcomer's equally impatient demand: "Is it Mary? Are those the children?" for she had dropped her sick head upon a soft old breast, and had an old fresh sweet faded face bent down upon her, lovely with

love and age, and a pure heart. "Cry, my dear love, cry, it will do you good," was all that Aunt Agatha said. And she cried, too, with good will, and yet did not know whether it was for sorrow or joy. This was how Mary, coming back to a fashion of existence which she knew not, was taken home.

CHAPTER X.

AUNT AGATHA had grown into a sweet old lady: not so old, perhaps, but that she might have made up still into that elderly aspirant after youth, for whose special use the name "old maid" must have been invented. And yet there is a sweetness in the name, and it was not inapplicable to the fair old woman, who received Mary Ochterlony into her kind arms. There was a sort of tender misty consciousness upon her age, just as there is a tender unconsciousness in youth, of so many things that cannot but come to the knowledge of people who have eaten of the tree in the middle of the garden. She was surrounded by the unknown as was seemly to such a maiden soul. And yet she was old, and gleams of experience, and dim knowledge at second hand, had come to her from those misty tracts. Though she had not, and never could

have, half the vigour or force in her which Mary had even in her subdued and broken state, still she had strength of affection and goodness enough to take the management of all affairs into her hands for the moment, and to set herself at the head of the little party. She took Mary and the children from the ship, and brought them to the inn at which she had stayed the night before; and, what was a still greater achievement, she repressed Winnie, and kept her in a semi-subordinate and silent state — which was an effort which taxed all Aunt Agatha's powers. Though it may seem strange to say it, Mary and her young sister did not, as people say, take to each other at that first meeting. It was twelve years since they had met, and the eighteen-year-old young woman, accustomed to be a sovereign among her own people, and have all her whims attended to, did not, somehow, commend herself to Mary, who was broken, and joyless, and feeble, and little capable of glitter and motion. Aunt Agatha took the traveller to a cool room, where comparative quiet was to be had, and took off her heavy bonnet and cloak, and made her lie down, and came and sat by her. The children were in the next room, where the sound of their voices could reach their mother to keep her heart; and then Aunt Agatha

took Mary's hand in both of hers, and said, "Tell me about it, my dear love." It was a way she had of speaking, but yet such words are sweet; especially to a forlorn creature who has supposed that there is nobody left in the world to address her so. And then Mary told her sad story with all the details that women love, and cried till the fountain of tears was for the time exhausted, and grief itself by its very vehemence had got calm; which was, as Aunt Agatha knew by instinct, the best way to receive a poor woman who was a widow, and had just set her solitary feet for the first time upon the shores which she left as a bride.

And so they rested and slept that first night on English soil. There are moments when sorrow feels sacramental, and as if it never could be disturbed again by the pettier emotions of life. Mrs. Ochterlony had gone to sleep in this calm, and it was with something of the same feeling that she awoke. As if life, as she thought, being over, its cares were in some sense over too, and that now nothing could move her further; unless, indeed, it might be any harm to the children, which, thank God, there was no appearance of. In this state of mind she rose up and said her prayers, mingling them with some of those great tears which gather one by one as the

ground. It was not the *beauté du diable*, the bewildering charm of youth, and freshness, and smiles, and rose tints. She had something of all this, and to boot she had features—*beaux traits*. But as for this part of her power, Winnie, to do her justice, thought nothing of it; perhaps, to have understood that people minded what she said, and noticed what she did because she was very handsome, would have conveyed something like an insult and affront to the young lady. She did not care much, nor mind much at the present moment, whether she was pretty or not. She had no rivals, and beauty was a weapon the importance of which had not occurred to her. But she did care a good deal for being Winifred Seton, and as such, mistress of all she surveyed; and though she could have beaten herself for it, it galled her involuntarily to find herself thus all at once in the presence of a person whom Providence seemed to have set, somehow, in a higher position, and who was more interesting than herself. It was a wicked thought, and she did it battle. If it had been left to her, how she could have petted and cared for Mary, how she would have borne her triumphantly over all the fatigues of the journey, and thought nothing to take the tickets, and mind the luggage, and struggle with the railway porters

for Mary's sake! But to have Mary come in and absorb Aunt Agatha's and everybody's first look, their first appeal and principal regard, was trying to Winnie; and she had never learned yet to banish altogether from her eyes what she thought.

"It does not matter, aunt," said Mary; "I cannot make a recluse of myself—I must go among strangers—and it is well to be able to practise a little with Winnie and you."

"You must not mind Winnie and me, my darling," said Aunt Agatha, who had a way of missing the arrow, as it were, and catching some of the feathers of it as it flew past.

"What do you mean about going among strangers?" said the keener Winnie. "I hope you don't think we are strangers; and there is no need for you to go into society that I can see—not now at least; or at all events not unless you like," she continued with a suspicion of sharpness in her tone, not displeased, perhaps, on the whole that Mary was turning out delusive, and was thinking already of society—for which notwithstanding she scorned her sister, as was natural to a young woman at the experienced age of eighteen.

"Society is not what I was thinking of," said Mary, who in her turn did not like her young

sister's criticism; and she took her seat and her cup of tea with an uncomfortable sense of opposition. She had thought that she could not be annoyed any more by petty matters, and was incapable of feeling the little cares and complications of life, and yet it was astonishing how Winnie's little, sharp, half-sarcastic tone brought back the faculty of being annoyed.

"The little we have at Kirtell will be a comfort to you, my love," said the soothing voice of Aunt Agatha; "all old friends. The vicar you know, Mary, and the doctor, and poor Sir Edward. There are some new people, but I do not make much account of them; and our little visiting would harm nobody," the old lady said, though with a slight tone of apology, not quite satisfied in herself that the widow should be even able to think of society so soon.

Upon which a little pucker of vexation came to Mary's brow. As if she cared or could care for their little visiting, and the vicar, and the doctor, and Sir Edward! she to whom going among strangers meant something so real and so hard to bear.

"Dear Aunt Agatha," she said, "I am afraid you will not be pleased; but I have not been looking forward to anything so pleasant as going to Kirtell. The first thing I have to think of

is the boys and their interests. And Francis Ochterlony has asked us to go to Earlston." These words came all confused from Mary's lips. She broke down, seeing what was coming; for this was something that she never had calculated on, or thought of having to bear.

A dead pause ensued; Aunt Agatha started and flushed all over, and gave an agitated exclamation, and then a sudden blank came upon her sweet old face. Mary did not look at her, but she saw without looking how her aunt stiffened into resentment, and offence, and mortification. She changed in an instant, as if Mrs. Ochterlony's confused statement had been a spell, and drew herself up and sat motionless, a picture of surprised affection and wounded pride. Poor Mary saw it, and was grieved to the heart, and yet could not but resent such a want of understanding of her position and sympathy for herself. She lifted her cup to her lips with a trembling hand, and her tea did not refresh her. And it was the only near relative she had in the world, the tenderest-hearted creature in existence, a woman who could be cruel to nobody, who thus shut up her heart against her. Thus the three women sat together round their breakfast-table, and helped each other, and said nothing for one stern moment,

which was a cruel moment for two of them at least.

"Earlston!" said Aunt Agatha at last, with a quiver in her voice. "Indeed it never occurred to me—I had not supposed that Francis Ochterlony had been so much to—— But never mind; if that is what you think best for yourself, Mary——"

"There is nothing best for myself," said Mrs. Ochterlony, with the sharpness of despair. "I think it is my duty—and—and Hugh, I know, would have thought so. Our boy is his uncle's heir. They are the—the only Ochterlonys left now. It is what I must—what I ought to do."

And then there was another pause. Aunt Agatha for her part would have liked to cry, but then she had her side of the family to maintain, and though every pulse in her was beating with disappointment and mortified affection, she was not going to show that. "You must know best," she said, taking up her little air of dignity; "I am sure you must know best; I would never try to force my way of thinking on you, Mary. No doubt you have been more in the world than I have; but I did think when a woman was in trouble that to go among her own friends——"

"Yes," said Mary, who was overwhelmed, and

did not feel able to bear it, "but her friends might understand her and have a little pity for her, aunt, when she had hard things to do that wrung her heart——"

"My dear," said Aunt Agatha, with, on her side, the bitterness of unappreciated exertion, "if you will think how far I have come, and what an unusual journey I have made, I think you will perceive that to accuse me of want of pity——"

"Don't worry her, Aunt Agatha," said Winnie, "she is not accusing you of want of pity. I think it a very strange sort of thing, myself; but let Mary have justice, that was not what she meant."

"I should like to know what she did mean," said Aunt Agatha, who was trembling with vexation, and with those tears which she wanted so much to shed; and then two or three of them dropped on the broad-brimmed cambric cuff which she was wearing solely on Mary's account. For, to be sure, Major Ochterlony was not to say a relation of hers that she should have worn such deep mourning for him. "I am sure I don't want to interfere, if she prefers Francis Ochterlony to her own friends," she added, with tremulous haste. She was the very same Aunt Agatha who had taken Mary to her arms the

day before, and sat by her bed, listening to all the sad story of her widowhood. She had wept for Hugh, and she would have shared her cottage and her garden and all she had with Mary, with good will and bounty, eagerly—but Francis Ochterlony was a different matter; and it was not in human nature to bear the preference of a husband's brother to "her own friends." "They may be the last Ochterlonys," said Aunt Agatha, "but I never understood that a woman was to give up her own family entirely; and your sister was born a Seton like you and me, Winnie;—I don't understand it, for my part."

Aunt Agatha broke down when she had said this, and cried more bitterly, more effusively, so long as it lasted, than she had cried last night over Hugh Ochterlony's sudden ending: and Mary could not but feel that; and as for Winnie, she sat silent, and if she did not make things worse, at least she made no effort to make them better. On the whole, it was not much wonder. They had made great changes in the cottage for Mary's sake. Aunt Agatha had given up her parlour, her own pretty room that she loved, for a nursery, and they had made up their minds that the best chamber was to be Mary's, with a sort of sense that the fresh chintz and the pictures on the walls—it was the only bed-

room that had any pictures—would make up to her if anything could. And now to find all the time that it was Francis Ochterlony, and not her own friends, that she was going to! Winnie sat quite still, with her fine profile cut out sternly against the dark green wall, looking immovable and unfeeling, as only a fine profile can under such circumstances. This was what came of Mary's placid morning, and the dear union of family support and love into which she thought she had come. It was harder upon Mrs. Ochterlony than if Aunt Agatha had not come to meet her. She had to sit blank and silent like a criminal, and see the old lady cry and the young lady lift up the stern delicacy of that profile against her. They were disappointed in Mary; and not only were they disappointed, but mortified—wounded in their best feelings and embarrassed in secondary matters as well; for naturally Aunt Agatha had told everybody that she was going to bring her niece, Mrs. Ochterlony, and the poor dear children home.

Thus it will be seen that the first breakfast in England was a very unsatisfactory meal for Mary. She took refuge with her children when it was over, and shut up, as she had been forced to do in other days, another door in her heart; and Aunt Agatha and Winnie, on the other hand,

withdrew to their apartment and talked it over, and kindled each other's indignation. "If you knew the kind of man he was, Winnie!" Aunt Agatha said, with a severity which was not entirely on Mary's account; "not the sort of man I would trust those poor dear fatherless children with. I don't believe he has any religious principles. Dear, dear, to think how Mary should have changed! I never could have thought she would have preferred Francis Ochterlony, and turned against her own friends."

"I don't know anything about Francis Ochterlony," said Winnie, "but I know what a lot of bother we have had at home making all those changes; and your parlour that you had given up, Aunt Agatha—I must say when I think of that——"

"That is nothing, my love," said Aunt Agatha; "I was not thinking of what I have done, I hope—as if the sacrifice was anything." But nevertheless the tears came into her eyes at the thought. It is hard when one has made a sacrifice with a liberal heart, to have it thrown back, and to feel that it is useless. This is hard, and Aunt Agatha was only human. If she had been alone, probably after the first moment of annoyance she would have gone to Mary, and the two would have cried together, and after

little Hugh's prospects had been discussed, Miss Seton would have consented that it was best for her niece to go to Earlston; but then Winnie was there to talk it over and keep up Aunt Agatha's indignation. And Mary was wounded, and had retired and shut herself up among her children. And it was thus that the most trifling and uncalled-for of cares came, with little pricks of vexation and disappointment, to disturb at its very outset the new chapter of life which Mrs. Ochterlony had imagined herself to be entering upon in such a calm of tranquillizing grief.

They were to go to London that day, and to continue their journey to the North by the night train: but it was no longer a journey in which any of the party could take any pleasure. As for Mary, in the great revulsion of her disappointment, it seemed to her as if there was no comfort for her anywhere. She had to go to Earlston to accept a home from Francis Ochterlony, whom she had never "taken to," even in her young days. And it had occurred to her that her aunt and sister would understand why, and would be sorry for her, and console her under this painful effort. When, on the contrary, they proved to be affronted and indignant, Mary's heart shut close, and retreated within itself. She could take her children into her

arms, and press them against her heart, as if that would do it some good: but she could not talk to the little things, nor consult them, nor share anything with them except such smiles as were practicable. To a woman who has been used to talk all her concerns over with some one, it is terrible to feel her yearnings for counsel and sympathy turned back upon her own soul, and to be struck dumb, and feel that no ear is open to her, and that in all the world there is no one living to whom her affairs are more than the affairs of a stranger. Some poor women there are who must have fellowship somehow, and who will be content with pity if sympathy is not to be had. But Mary was not of this kind of women. She shut her doors. She went in, into herself in the silence and solitude, and felt her instinctive yearning to be helped and understood come pouring back upon her like a bitter flood. And then she looked at her little boys in their play, who had need of all from her, and could give her back but their childish fondness, and no help, or stay, or counsel. It is hard upon a woman, but yet it is a thing which every woman must confront and make up her mind to, whom God places in such circumstances. I do not know if it is easier work for a man in the same position. Mary had felt the prop of ex-

pected sympathy and encouragement and affection rudely driven from under her, and when she came in among her innocent helpless children she faced her lot, and did not deceive herself any more. To judge for herself, and do the best that in her lay, and take all the responsibilities upon her own head, whatever might follow; to know that nobody now in all the world was for her, or stood by her, except in a very secondary way, after his or her concerns and intentions and feelings had been carefully provided for in the first place. This was how her position appeared to her. And, indeed, such *was* her position, without any exaggeration. It was very kind of Francis Ochterlony to be willing to take her in, and very kind of Aunt Agatha to have made preparations for her; and kindness is sweet, and yet it is bitter, and hard, and cold, and killing to meet with. It made Mary sick to her heart, and filled her with a longing to take up her babes and rush away into some solitary corner, where nobody would ever see her again or hear of her. I do not say that she was right, or that it was a proper state of mind to be in. And Mary was too right-minded a woman to indulge in it long; but that was the feeling that momentarily took possession of her as she put the doors to in her heart, and realized that she

really was alone there, and that her concerns were hers alone, and belonged to nobody else in the world.

And, on the other hand, it was very natural for Aunt Agatha and Winnie. They knew the exertions they had made, and the flutter of generous excitement in which they had been, and their readiness to give up their best for the solace of the widow. And naturally the feeling that all their sacrifices were unnecessary and their preparations made in vain, turned the honey into gall for the moment. It was not their part to take Mary's duty into consideration, in the first place; and they did not know beforehand of Francis Ochterlony's letter, nor the poor Major's confidence that his brother would be a friend to his widow. And then Aunt Agatha's parlour, which was all metamorphosed, and the changes that had been made through the whole house! The result was, that Aunt Agatha, offended, did not so much as offer to her niece the little breathing-time Mary had hoped for. When they got to London, she re-opened the subject, but it was in an unanswerable way.

"I suppose your brother-in-law expects you?" she said. "I think it will be better to wait till to-morrow before you start, that he may send

the carriage to the station for you. I don't ask you to come to me for the night, for it would be a pity to derange the children for so short a time."

"Very well, aunt," said Mary, sadly. And she wrote to Mr. Ochterlony, and slept that night in town—her strength almost failing her at the thought that, in her feebleness and excitement, she had to throw herself immediately on Francis Ochterlony's tender mercies. She even paused for a moment to think, might she not really do as her heart suggested—find out some corner of refuge for herself with which nobody could intermeddle, and keep apart from them all? But Mary had come "home to her friends," as everybody said at the station; and she had a woman's prejudices, and it seemed unnatural to her to begin, without any interposition of the people belonging to her, that strange and solitary life of independence or self-dependence which was what she must decide upon some time. And then there was always Mr. Ochterlony's letter, which was so kind. Thus it was fixed by a few words, and could not be changed. Aunt Agatha had a terrible compunction afterwards, and could not get Mary's look out of her head, as she owned to Winnie, and would have got up out of her bed in the middle

of the night, and gone to Mary and begged her to come to the cottage first, if it had not been that Winnie might have woke up, and that she would have to cross a passage to Mary's room; and in a hotel where "gentlemen" were continually about, who could tell whom she might meet? So they all slept, or pretended to sleep, and said nothing about it; and the next day set off with no further explanations, on their way "home."

CHAPTER XI.

EARLSTON is a house which lies in a little green valley among the grey folds of the Shap Fells. It is not an inviting country, though the people love it as people do love everything that belongs to them; and it has a very different aspect from the wooded dell a little farther north, where strays the romantic little Kirtell, and where Aunt Agatha's cottage smiled upon a tufted slope, with the music of the cheery river in its ears day and night. The rivers about Earlston were shallow, and ran dry in summer, though it was not because of any want of rain; and the greyness of the hills made a kind of mist in the air to unaccustomed eyes. Everybody, who has ever gone to the north that way, knows the deep cuttings about Shap, where the railway plunges through between two humid living limestone walls, where the cottages, and the fences, and the

farm-houses all lead up in level tones of grey to the vast greyness of the piebald hills, and where the line of pale sky above is grey too in most cases. It was at one of the little stations in this monotonous district that Mrs. Ochterlony and her children and her ayah were deposited—Aunt Agatha, with an aspect of sternness, but a heart that smote her, and eyes that kept filling with tears she was too proud to shed, looking on the while. Winnie looked on too without the compunction, feeling very affronted and angry. They were going further on, and the thought of home was overcast to both these ladies by the fact that everybody would ask for Mary, and that the excitement of the past few weeks would collapse in the dreariest and suddenest way when they were seen to return alone. As for Mary, she looked grey like the landscape, under her heavy veil—grey, silent, in a kind of dull despair, persuading herself that the best thing of all was to say nothing about it, and shut only more closely the doors of that heart where nobody now had any desire to come in. She lifted her little boys out, and did not care even to look if the carriage was waiting for her—and then she came to the window to bid her aunt and sister good-bye. She was so disappointed and sick-hearted, and felt for the moment that the small amount of affection

and comprehension which they were capable of giving her was so little worth the trouble of seeking for, that Mary did not even ask to be written to. She put up her pale face, and said good-by in a dreary unexpectant tone that doubled the compunction in Aunt Agatha's bosom. "Oh, Mary, if you had but been coming with us!" cried that inconsistent woman, on the spur of the moment. "It is too late to speak of it now," said Mary, and kissed her and turned away; and the heartless train dashed off, and carried off Aunt Agatha with that picture in her eyes of the forlorn little group on the platform of the railway station—the two little boys clinging close to their mother, and she standing alone among strangers, with the widow's veil hanging over her colourless face. "Can you see the carriage, Winnie?—look out and tell me if you can see it," said Aunt Agatha. But the engine that carried them on was too quick for Winnie, and had already swept out of sight. And they pursued their journey, feeling guilty and wretched, as indeed, to a certain extent, they deserved to feel. A two months' widow, with a baby and two helpless little boys—and at the best it could only be a servant who had come to meet her, and she would have everything to do for herself, and to face her brother-in-law without any support or helper. When Aunt

Agatha thought of this, she sank back in her corner and sobbed. To think that she should have been the one to take offence and be affronted at Mary's first word, and desert her thus; when she might have taken her home and comforted her, and then, if it must have ended so, conveyed her to Earlston: Aunt Agatha cried, and deserved to cry, and even Winnie felt a twinge at her heart; and they got rather angry with each other before they reached home, and felt disposed to accuse each other, and trembled both of them before the idea of meeting Peggy, Miss Seton's domestic tyrant, who would rush to the door with her heart in her mouth to receive "our Miss Mary and the puir dear fatherless bairns." Mary might be silent about it, and never complain of unkindness; but it was not to be expected that Peggy would have the same scruples; and these two guilty and miserable travellers trembled at the thought of her as they made their wretched way home.

When the train had disappeared, Mary tried to take a kind of cold comfort to herself. She stood all alone, a stranger, with the few rustic passengers and rustic railway officials staring at her as if she had dropped from the skies, and no apparent sign anywhere that her coming had been looked for, or that there was any resting-place

for her in this grey country. And she said to herself that it was natural, and must always be so henceforth, and that it was best at once to accustom herself to her lot. The carriage had not come, nor any message from Earlston to say she was expected, and all that she could do was to go into the rude little waiting-room, and wait there with the tired children till some conveyance could be got to take her to her brother-in-law's house. Her thoughts would not be pleasant to put down on paper, could it be done; and yet they were not so painful as they had been the day before, when Aunt Agatha failed her, or seemed to fail. Now that disappointed craving for help and love and fellowship was over for the moment, and she had nothing but her own duty and Francis Ochterlony to encounter, who was not a man to give any occasion for vain hopes. Mary did not expect fellowship or love from her brother-in-law. If he was kind and tolerant of the children, and moderately considerate to herself, it was all that she looked for from him. Perhaps, though he had invited her, he had not been prepared to have her thrown on his hands so soon; and it might be that the domestic arrangements of Earlston were not such as to admit of the unlooked-for invasion of a lady and a nursery on such very short notice. But the most prominent feeling in

Mrs. Ochterlony's mind was weariness, and that longing to escape anywhere, which is the most universal of all sentiments when the spirit is worn out and sick to death. Oh, that she had wings like a dove!—though Mary had nowhere to flee to, nobody to seek consolation from; and instead of having a home anywhere on earth awaiting her, was herself the home, the only shelter they understood, of the little pale fatherless children who clustered around her. If she could but have taken possession of one of those poor cottages, grey and homely as they looked, and put the little ones to bed in it, and drawn a wooden chair to the fire, and been where she had a right to be! It was July, but the weather was cold at Shap, and Mary had that instinct common to wounded creatures of creeping to the fire, as if there was a kind of comfort in its warmth. She could have borne her burden bravely, or at least she thought so, if this had been what awaited her. But it was Earlston and Francis Ochterlony that awaited her—a stranger and a stranger's house. All these thoughts, and many more, were passing through her mind, as she sat in the little waiting-room with her baby in her arms, and her two elder boys pressing close to her. The children clung and appealed to her, and the helpless Hindoo woman crouched at her mistress's side; but as

for Mary, there was nobody to give her any support or countenance. It was a hard opening to the stern way which had henceforward to be trodden alone.

Francis Ochterlony, however, though he had a certain superb indifference to the going-out and coming-in of trains, and had forgotten the precise hour, was not a wretch nor a brute, and had not forgotten his visitors. While Mary sat and waited, and while the master of the little station made slow but persevering search after some possible means of conveyance for her, a heavy rumbling of wheels became audible, and the carriage from Earlston made its tardy appearance. It was an old-fashioned vehicle, drawn by two horses, which betrayed their ordinary avocations much in the same way as the coachman did, who, though dressed, as they were, for the occasion, carried a breath of the fields about him, which was more convincing than any conventionalism of garments. But such as it was, the Earlston carriage was not without consideration in the countryside. All the people about turned out in a leisurely way to lift the children into it, and shoulder the boxes into such corners as could be found for them—which was an affair that demanded many counsellors—and at length the vehicle got under way. Twilight began to come on as they mounted up into

the grey country, by the winding grey roads fenced in with limestone walls. Everything grew greyer in the waning light. The very trees, of which there were so few, dropped into the gathering shadows, and deepened them without giving any livelier tint of colour to the scene. The children dropped asleep, and the ayah crooned and nodded over the baby; but Mary, who had no temptation to sleep, looked out with steady eyes, and, though she saw nothing distinctly, took in unawares all the comfortless chill and monotony of the landscape. It went to her heart, and made her shiver. Or perhaps it was only the idea of meeting Francis Ochterlony that made her shiver. If the children, any one of them, had only been old enough to understand it a little, to clasp her hand or her neck with the exuberance of childish sympathy! But they did not understand, and dropped asleep, or asked with timid, quivering little voices, how long it would be before they got home. Home! no wonder Mrs. Ochterlony was cold, and felt the chill go to her heart. Thus they went on for six or seven weary miles, taking as many hours, as Mary thought. Aunt Agatha had arrived at her cottage, though it was nearly thirty miles further on, while the comfortless party were still jogging along in the Earlston carriage; but Mary did

not think particularly of that. She did not think at all, poor soul. She saw the grey hill-side gliding past her, and in a vague way, at the same moment, seemed to see herself, a bride, going gaily past on the same road, and rehearsed all the past over again with a dull pain, and shivered, and felt cold—cold to her heart. This was partly perhaps because it is chilly in Cumberland, when one has just come from India; and partly because there was something that affected a woman's fanciful imagination in the misty monotony of the limestone country, and the grey waste of the hills.

Earlston, too, was grey, as was to be expected; and the trees which surrounded it had lost colour in the night. The hall was but dimly lighted, when the door was opened—as is but too common in country houses of so retired a kind—and there was nobody ready at the instant to open the door or to receive the strangers. To be sure, people were called and came—the housekeeper first, in a silk gown, which rustled excessively, and with a certain air of patronizing affability; and then Mr. Ochterlony, who had been sitting, as he usually did, in his dressing-gown, and who had to get into his coat so hurriedly that he had not recovered from it when he shook hands with his sister-in-law; and then by degrees servants ap-

peared, and lifted out the sleepy, startled children, who, between waking and sleeping, worn out, frightened, and excited, were precisely in the condition which it is most difficult to manage. And the ayah, who could hold no Christian communication with anybody around her, was worse than useless to her poor mistress. When Mr. Ochterlony led the way into the great, solemn, dark, dining-room—which was the nearest room at hand—the children, instead of consenting to be led upstairs, clung with one unanimous accord to their mother. Little Wilfrid got to her arms, notwithstanding all remonstrances, and Hugh and Islay each seized silently a handful of her black dress, crushing the crape beyond all remedy. It was thus she entered Earlston, which had been her husband's birthplace, and was to be her son's inheritance—or so at least Mary thought.

"I hope you have had a pleasant journey," Mr. Ochterlony said, shaking hands with her again. "I daresay they are tired, poor little things—but you have had good weather, I hope." This he said after he had indicated to Mary a large easy-chair in carved oak, which stood by the side of the fireplace, and into which, with little Wilfred clinging to her, and Islay and Hugh holding fast by her dress, it was not so easy to get. The master of the house did not sit down

himself, for it was dreary and dark, and he was a man of fine perceptions; but he walked to the window and looked out, and then came back again to his sister-in-law. "I am glad you have had such good weather—but I am sure you must all be tired," he said.

"Yes," said Mary, who would have liked to cry, "very tired; but I hope we did not come too soon. Your letter was so kind that I thought——"

"Oh don't speak of it," said Mr. Ochterlony; and then he stood before her on the dark hearth, and did not know what more to say. The twilight was still lingering, and there were no lights in the room, and it was fitted up with the strictest regard to propriety, and just as a dining-room ought to be. Weird gleams of dull reflection out of the depths of old mahogany lay low towards the floor, bewildering the visitor; and there was not even the light of a fire, which, for merely conventional motives, because it was July, did not occupy its usual place; though Mary, fresh from India, and shivering with the chill of excitement and nervousness and grief, would have given anything to be within reach of one. Neither did she know what to say to her almost unknown brother-in-law, whose face even she could see very imperfectly; and the children grasped her with

that tight hold which is in itself a warning, and shows that everything is possible in the way of childish fright and passion. But still it was indispensable that she should find something to say.

"My poor little boys are so young," she said, faltering. "It was very very good of you to ask us, and I hope they wont be troublesome. I think I will ask the housekeeper to show us where we are to be. The railway tires them more than the ship did. This is Hugh," said Mary, swallowing as best she could the gasp in her throat, and detaching poor little Hugh's hand from her crape. But she had tears in her voice, and Mr. Ochterlony had a wholesome dread of crying. He gave his nephew a hurried pat on the head without looking at him, and called for Mrs. Gilsland, who was at hand among the shadows rustling with her silk gown.

"Oh!" he said hurriedly. "A fine little fellow I am sure;—but you are quite right, and they must be tired, and I will not detain you. Dinner is at seven," said Mr. Ochterlony. What could he say? He could not even see the faces of the woman and children whom it was his dread but evident duty to receive. When they went away under Mrs. Gilsland's charge, he followed them to the foot of the stairs, and stood looking after them as the procession mounted, guided by

the rustle of the housekeeper's gown. The poor man looked at them in a bewildered way, and then went off to his library, where his own shaded lamp was lit, and where everything was cosy and familiar. Arrived there, he threw himself into his own chair with a sigh. He was not a brute, nor a wretch, as we have said, and the least thing he could do when he heard of his poor brother's death was to offer a shelter—temporarily at least—to the widow and her children: but perhaps a lurking hope that something might turn up to prevent the invasion had been in his mind up to this day. Now she was here, and what was he to do with her? Now *they* were here, which was still more serious—three boys (even though one of them was a baby) in a house full of everything that was daintiest and rarest and most delicate! No wonder Mr. Ochterlony was momentarily stupefied by their arrival; and then he had not even seen their faces to know what they were like. He remembered Mary of old in her bride-days, but then she was too young, too fresh, too unsubdued to please him. If she were as full of vigour and energy now, what was to become of a quiet man who, above all things, loved tranquillity and leisure? This was what Francis Ochterlony was thinking as his visitors went up-stairs.

Mrs. Ochterlony was inducted into the best rooms in the house. Her brother-in-law was not an effusive or sympathetic man by nature, but still he knew what was his duty under the circumstances. Two great rooms gleaming once more with ebon gleams out of big wardrobes and half-visible mirrors, with beds that looked a little like hearses, and heavy solemn hangings. Mrs. Gilsland's silk gown rustled about everywhere, pointing out a thousand conveniences unknown at the station; but all Mary was thinking about was one of those grey cottages on the road, with the fire burning brightly, and its little homely walls lighted up with the fitful, cheerful radiance. If she could but have had a fire, and crept up to it, and knelt on the hearth and held herself to the comforting warmth! There are times when a poor creature feels all body, just as there are times when she feels all soul. And then, to think that dinner was at seven! just as it had been when she came there with Hugh, a girl all confident of happiness and life. No doubt Mr. Ochterlony would have forgiven his sister-in-law, and probably indeed would have been as much relieved as she, if she had but sent an apology and stayed in her room all the evening. But Mary was not the kind of woman to do this. It did not occur to her to depart from the natural

routine, or make so much talk about her own feelings or sentiments as would be necessary even to excuse her. What did it matter? If it had to be done, it had to be done, and there was nothing more to be said. This was the view her mind took of most matters; and she had always been well, and never had any pretext to get out of things she did not like, as women do who have headaches and handy little illnesses. She could always do what was needful, and did always do it without stopping to make any questions; which is a servicable kind of temperament in life, and yet subjects people to many little martyrdoms which otherwise they might escape from. Though her heart was sick, she put on her best gown all covered with crape, and her widow's cap, and went down to dine with Francis Ochterlony in the great dining-room, leaving her children behind, and longing unspeakably for that cottage with the fire.

It was not such an unbecoming dress after all, notwithstanding what people say. Mary was worn and sad, but she was not faded; and the dead white of the cap that encircled her face, and the dead black of her dress, did not do so much harm as perhaps they ought to have done to that sweet and steadfast grace, which had made the regiment recognise and adopt young

Stafford's fanciful title. She was still Madonna Mary under that disfigurement; and on the whole she was *not* disfigured by her dress. Francis Ochterlony lifted his eyes with equal surprise and satisfaction to take a second look at poor Hugh's widow. He felt by instinct that Phidias himself could not have filled a corner in his drawing-room, which was so full of fine things, with a figure more fair or half so appropriate as that of the serene woman who now took her seat there, abstracted a little into the separation and remoteness of sorrow, but with no discord in her face. He liked her better so than with the group of children, who made her look as if she were a Charity, and the heavy veil hanging half over her face, which had a conventual and uncomfortable effect; and he was very courteous and attentive to his sister-in-law. "I hope you had good weather," he said in his deferential way; "and I trust, when you have been a few days at Earlston, the fatigue will wear off. You will find everything very quiet here."

"I hope so," said Mary; "but it is the children I am thinking of. I trust our rooms are a long distance off, and that we will not disturb you."

"That is quite a secondary matter," said Mr. Ochterlony. "The question is, are you comfortable? I hope you will let Mrs. Gilsland know

if anything is wanted. We are not—not quite used to these sort of things, you know; but I am sure, if anything is wanted——"

"You are very kind," said Mary; "I am sure we shall be very comfortable." And yet as she said so her thoughts went off with a leap to that little cottage interior, and the cheerful light that shone out of the window, and the fire that crackled and blazed within. Ah, if she were but there! not dining with Mr. Ochterlony in solemn grandeur, but putting her little boys to bed, and preparing their supper for them, and cheating away heavy thoughts by that dear common work for the comfort and service of her own which a woman loves. But this was not a sort of longing to give expression to at Earlston, where in the evening Mr. Ochterlony was very kind to his sister-in-law, and showed her a great many priceless things which Mary regarded with trembling, thinking of two small barbarians about to be let loose among them, not to speak of little Wilfrid, who was old enough to dash an Etruscan vase to the earth, or upset the rarest piece of china, though he was still only a baby. She could not tell how they were so much as to walk through that drawing-room without doing some harm, and her heart sank within her as she listened to all those loving lingering descriptions which only a virtuoso

can make. Mr. Ochterlony retired that evening with a sense always agreeable to a man, that in doing a kind thing he had not done a foolish one, and that the children of such a fair and gracious woman could not be the graceless imps who had been haunting his dreams ever since he knew they were coming home; but Mary for her part took no such flattering unction to her soul. She sighed as she went upstairs sad and weary to the great sombre room, in which a couple of candles burned like tiny stars in a world of darkness, and looked at her sleeping boys, and wondered what they were to do in this collection of curiosities and beauties. She was an ignorant woman, and did not, alas! care anything at all for the Venus Anadyomene. But she thought of little Hugh tilting that marble lady and her pedestal over, and shook and trembled at the idea. She trembled too with cold and nervous agitation, and the chill of sorrow in her heart. In the lack of other human sources of consolation, oh! to go to that cottage hearth, and kneel down and feel to one's very soul the comfort of the warm consoling fire.

CHAPTER XII.

IT had need to be a mind which has reached the last stage of human sentiment which can altogether resist the influence of a lovely summer morning, all made of warmth, and light, and softened sounds, and far-off odours. Mrs. Ochterlony had not reached this last stage; she was still young, and she was only at the beginning of her loneliness, and her heart had not sickened at life, as hearts do sometimes which have made a great many repeated efforts to live, and have had to give in again and again. When she saw the sunshine lying in a supreme peacefulness upon those grey hills, and all the pale sky and blue depths of air beaming softly with that daylight which comes from God, her courage came back to her in spite of herself. She began the morning by the shedding of those silent tears which are all the apology one can make to one's

dead, for having the heart to begin another day without them; and when that moment was over, and the children had lifted all their daylight faces in a flutter of curiosity and excitement about this new "home" they had come to, after so long talking of it and looking forward to it, things did not seem so dark to Mary as on the previous evening. For one thing, the sun was warm and shone in at her windows, which made a great difference; and with her children's voices in her ears, and their faces fresh in the morning light, what woman could be altogether without courage? "So long as they are well," she said to herself—and went down stairs a little consoled, to pour out Mr. Ochterlony's coffee for him, thanking heaven in her heart that her boys were to have a meal which had nothing calm nor classical about it, in the old nursery where their father had once eaten his breakfasts, and which had been hurriedly prepared for them. "The little dears must go down after dinner; but master, ma'am—well, he's an old bachelor, you know," said Mrs. Gilsland, while explaining this arrangement. "Oh, thank you; I hope you will help me to keep them from disturbing him," Mary had said; and thus it was with a lighter heart that she went down stairs.

Mr. Ochterlony came down too at the same time in an amiable frame of mind. Notwithstanding that he had to put himself into a morning coat, and abjured his dressing-gown, which was somewhat of a trial for a man of fixed habits, nothing could exceed the graciousness of his looks. A certain horrible notion common to his class, that children scream all night long, and hold an entire household liable to be called up at any moment, had taken possession of his mind. But his tired little guests had been swallowed up in the silence of the house, and had neither screamed, nor shouted, nor done anything to disturb its habitual quiet; and the wonderful satisfaction of having done his duty, and not having suffered for it, had entered Mr. Ochterlony's mind. It is in such circumstances that the sweet sense of well-doing, which is generally supposed the best reward of virtue, settles upon a good man's spirits. The Squire might be premature in his self-congratulations, but then his sense of relief was exquisite. If nothing worse was to come of it than the presence of a fair woman, whose figure was always in drawing, and who never put herself into an awkward attitude—whose voice was soft, and her movements tranquil, Mr. Ochterlony felt that self-sacrifice after all was practicable. The boys

could be sent to school as all boys were, and at intervals might be endured when there was nothing else for it. Thus he came down in a benign condition, willing to be pleased. As for Mary, the first thing that disturbed her calm, was the fact that she was herself of no use at her brother-in-law's breakfast-table. He made his coffee himself, and then he went into general conversation in the kindest way, to put her at her ease.

"That is the Farnese Hercules," he said; "I saw it caught your eye last night. It is from a cast I had made for the purpose, and is considered very perfect; and that you know is the new Pallas, the Pallas that was found in the Sestina Villa; you recollect, perhaps?"

"I am afraid not," said Mary, faltering; and she looked at them, poor soul, with wistful eyes, and tried to feel a little interest. "I have been so long out of the way of everything——"

"To be sure," said the Squire, encouragingly, "and my poor brother Hugh, I remember, knew very little about it. He went early to India, and had few advantages, poor fellow." All this Mr. Ochterlony said while he was concocting his coffee; and Mary had nothing to do but to sit and listen to him with her face fully open to his inspection if he liked, and no kindly urn

before her to hide the sudden rush of tears and indignation. A man who spent his life having casts made, and collecting what Mary in her heart with secret rage called "pretty things!" —that he should make a complacent contrast between himself and his brother! The suggestion filled Mrs. Ochterlony with a certain speechless fury which was born of her grief.

"He knew well how to do his duty," she said, as soon as she could speak; and she would not let her tears fall, but opened her burning eyes wide, and absorbed them somehow out of pride for Hugh.

"Poor fellow!" said his brother, daintily pouring out the fragrant coffee. "I don't know if he ever could have had much appreciation of Art; but I am sure he made a good soldier, as you say. I was very much moved and shocked when I heard—but do not let us talk of such painful subjects; another time, perhaps——"

And Mary sat still with her heart beating, and said no more—thinking through all the gentle flow of conversation that followed of the inconceivable conceit that could for a moment class Francis Ochterlony's dilettante life with that of her dead Hugh, who had played a man's part in the world, and had the heart to die for his duty's sake. And this useless Squire could

speak of the few advantages he had! It was unreasonable, for, to tell the truth, the Squire was much more accomplished, much better instructed than the Major. The Numismatic Society and the Society of Antiquaries, and even, on certain subjects, the British Association, would have listened to Francis Ochterlony as if he had been a messenger from heaven. Whereas Hugh the soldier would never have got a hearing nor dared to open his lips in any learned presence. But then that did not matter to his wife, who, notwithstanding her many high qualities, was not a perfectly reasonable woman. Those "few advantages" stood terribly in Mary's way for that first morning. They irritated her far more than Mr. Ochterlony could have had the least conception or understanding of. If anybody had given him a glass to look into her heart with, the Squire would have been utterly confounded by what he saw there. What had he done? And indeed he had done nothing that anybody (in his senses) could have found fault with; he had but turned Mary's thoughts once more with a violent longing to the roadside cottage, where at least, if she and her children were but safely housed, her soldier's memory would be shrined, and his sword hung up upon the homely wall, and his name turned into a

holy thing. Whereas he was only a younger brother who had gone away to India, and had few advantages, in the Earlston way of thinking. This was the uppermost thought in Mrs. Ochterlony's mind as her brother-in-law exhibited all his collections to her. The drawing-room, which she had but imperfectly seen in her weariness and preoccupation the previous night, was a perfect museum of things rich and rare. There were delicate marbles, tiny but priceless, standing out white and ethereal against the soft, carefully chosen, toned crimson of the curtains; and bronzes that were worth half a year's income of the lands of Earlston; and Etruscan vases and Pompeian relics; and hideous dishes with lizards on them, besides plaques of dainty porcelain with Raphael's designs; the very chairs were fantastic with inlaying and gilding—curious articles, some of them worth their weight in gold; and if you but innocently looked at an old cup and saucer on a dainty table wondering what it did there, it turned out to be the ware of Henri II., and priceless. To see Mary going over all this with her attention preoccupied and wandering, and yet a wistful interest in her eyes, was a strange sight. All that she had in the world was her children, and the tiny little income of a soldier's widow—and you may sup-

pose perhaps that she was thinking what a help to her and the still more valuable little human souls she had to care for, would have been the money's-worth of some of these fragile beauties. But that was not what was in Mrs. Ochterlony's mind. What occupied her, on the contrary, was an indignant wonder within herself how a man who spent his existence upon such trifles (they looked trifles to her, from her point of view, and in this of course she was still unreasonable) could venture to look down with complacency upon the real life, so honestly lived and so bravely ended, of his brother Hugh—poor Hugh, as he ventured to call him. Mr. Ochterlony might die a dozen times over, and what would his marble Venus care, that he was so proud of? But it was Hugh who had died; and it was a kind of comfort to feel that *he* at least, though they said he had few advantages, had left one faithful woman behind him to keep his grave green for ever.

The morning passed, however, though it was a long morning; and Mary looked into all the cabinets of coins and precious engraved gems, and rare things of all sorts, with a most divided attention and wandering mind—thinking where were the children? were they out-of-doors? were they in any trouble? for the unearthly

quietness in the house seemed to her experienced mother's ear to bode harm of some kind—either illness or mischief, and most likely the last. As for Mr. Ochterlony, it never occurred to him that his sister-in-law, while he was showing her his collections, should not be as indifferent as he was to any vulgar outside influence, "We shall not be disturbed," he said, with a calm reassuring smile, when he saw her glance at the door; "Mrs. Gilsland knows better," and he drew out another drawer of coins as he spoke. Poor Mary began to tremble, but the same sense of duty which made her husband stand to be shot at, kept her at her post. She went through with it like a martyr, without flinching, though longing, yearning, dying to get free. If she were but in that cottage, looking after her little boys' dinner, and hearing their voices as they played at the door—their servant and her own mistress, instead of the helpless slave of courtesy, and interest, and her position, looking at Francis Ochterlony's curiosities! When she escaped at last, Mary found that indeed her fears had not been without foundation. There had been some small breakages, and some small quarrels in the nursery, where Hugh and Islay had been engaged in single combat, and where baby Wilfrid had joined in with impartial kicks and scratches, to

the confusion of both combatants: all which alarming events the frightened ayah had been too weak-minded and helpless to prevent. And, by way of keeping them quiet, that bewildered woman had taken down a beautiful Indian canoe, which stood on a bracket in the corridor, and the boys, as was natural, with true scientific inquisitiveness had made researches into its constitution, such as horrified their mother. Mary was so cowardly as to put the boat together again with her own hands, and put it back on its bracket, and say nothing about it, with devout hopes that nobody would find it out—which, to be sure, was a terrible example to set before children. She breathed freely for the first time when she got them out—out of Earlston—out of Earlston grounds—to the hill-side, where, though everything was grey, the turf had a certain greenness, and the sky a certain blueness, and the sun shone warm, and nameless little English wild flowers were to be found among the grass; nameless things, too insignificant for anything but a botanist to classify, and Mrs. Ochterlony was no botanist. She put down Wilfrid on the grass, and sat by him, and watched for a little the three joyful unthinking creatures, harmonized without knowing it by their mother's presence, rolling about in an unaccustomed ecstacy upon

the English grass; and then Mary went back, without being quite aware of it, into the darker world of her own mind, and leant her head upon her hands and began to think.

She had a great deal to think about. She had come home obeying the first impulse, which suggested that a woman left alone in the world should put herself under the guidance and protection of "her friends:" and, in the first stupor of grief, it was a kind of consolation to think that she had still somebody belonging to her, and could put off those final arrangements for herself and by herself which one time or other must be made. When she decided upon this, Mary did not realize the idea of giving offence to Aunt Agatha by accepting Francis Ochterlony's invitation, nor of finding herself at Earlston in the strange nondescript position—something less than a member of the family, something more than a visitor—which she at present occupied. Her brother-in-law was very kind, but he did not know what to do with her; and her brother-in-law's household was very doubtful and uneasy, with a certain alarmed and suspicious sense that it might be a new and permanent mistress who had thus come in upon them—an idea which it was not to be expected that Mrs. Gilsland, who had been in authority so long, should

take kindly to. And then it was hard for Mary to live in a house where her children were simply tolerated, and in constant danger of doing inestimable mischief. She sat upon the grey hillside, and thought over it till her head ached. Oh, for that wayside cottage with the blazing fire! but Mrs. Ochterlony had no such refuge. She had come to Earlston of her own will, and she could not fly away again at once to affront and offend the only relation who might be of service to her boys—which was, no doubt, a sadly mercenary view to take of the subject. She stayed beside her children all day, feeling like a prisoner, afraid to move or to do anything, afraid to let the boys play or give scope to their limbs and voice. And then Hugh, though he was not old enough to sympathize with her, was old enough to put terrible questions. "Why shouldn't we make a noise?" the child said; "is my uncle a king, mamma, that we must not disturb him? Papa never used to mind." Mary sent her boy back to his play when he said this, with a sharp impatience which he could not understand. Ah, how different it was! and how stinging the pain that went to her heart at that suggestion. But then little Hugh, thank heaven, knew no better. Even the Hindoo woman, who had been a faithful woman in her way, but who

was going back again with another family bound for India, began to make preparations for her departure; and, after that, Mrs. Ochterlony's position would be still more difficult. This was how the first day at Earlston—the first day at home, as the children said—passed over Mary. It was, perhaps, of all other trials, the one most calculated to take from her any strength she might have left. And after all this she had to dress at seven o'clock, and leave her little boys in the big dark nursery, and go down to keep her brother-in-law company at dinner, to hear him talk of the Farnese Hercules, and of his collections, and travels, and, perhaps, of the "few advantages" his poor brother had had: which for a woman of a high spirit and independent character, and profound loyal love for the dead, was a very hard ordeal to bear.

The dinner, however, went over very fairly. Mr. Ochterlony was the soul of politeness, and, besides, he was pleased with his sister-in-law. She knew nothing about Art; but then, she had been long in India, and was a woman, and it was not to be wondered at. He meant no harm when he spoke about poor Hugh's few advantages. He knew that he had a sensible woman to deal with, and of course grief and that sort of thing cannot last for ever; and, on the whole,

Mr. Ochterlony saw no reason why he should not speak quite freely of his brother Hugh; and lament his want of proper training. *She* must have known that as well as he did. And, to tell the truth, he had forgotten about the children. He made himself very agreeable, and even went so far as to say that it was very pleasant to be able to talk over these matters with somebody who understood him. Mary sat waiting with a mixture of fright and expectation for the appearance of the children, who the housekeeper said were to come down to dessert; but they did not come, and nothing was said about them; and Mr. Ochterlony was fond of foreign habits, and took very little wine, and accompanied his sister-in-law upstairs when she left the table. He came with her in that troublesome French way with which Mary was not even acquainted, and made it impossible for her to hurry through the long passages to the nursery, and see what her forlorn little boys were about. What could they be doing all this time, lost at the other end of the great house where she could not even hear their voices, nor that soft habitual nursery hum which was a necessary accompaniment to her life? She had to sit down in a kind of despair and talk to Mr. Ochterlony, who took a seat beside her, and was very friendly. The summer

evening had begun to decline, and it was at this meditative moment that the master of Earlston liked to sit and contemplate his Psyche and his Venus, and call a stranger's attention to their beauties, and tell pleasant anecdotes about how he picked them up. Mrs. Ochterlony sat by her brother-in-law's side, and listened to his talk about Art with her ear strained to the most intense attention, prepared at any moment to hear a shriek from the outraged housekeeper, or a howl of unanimous woe from three culpable and terrified voices. There was something comic in the situation, but Mary's attention was not sufficiently disengaged to be amused.

"I have long wished to have some information about Indian Art," said Mr. Ochterlony. "I should be glad to know what an intelligent observer like yourself, with some practical knowledge, thought of my theory. My idea is—— But I am afraid you have a headache? I hope you have all the attention you require, and are comfortable? It would give me great pain to think that you were not perfectly comfortable. You must not feel the least hesitation in telling me——"

"Oh no, we have everything," said Mary. She thought she heard something outside like little steps and distant voices, and her heart

began to beat. But as for her companion, he was not thinking about such extraneous things.

"I hope so," said Mr. Ochterlony; and then he looked at his Psyche with the lingering look of a connoisseur, dwelling lovingly upon her marble beauty. "You must have that practical acquaintance which, after all, is the only thing of any use," he continued. "My idea is——"

And it was at this moment that the door was thrown open, and they all rushed in—all, beginning with little Wilfrid, who had just commenced to walk, and who came with a tottering dash, striking against a pedestal in his way, and making its precious burden tremble. Outside at the open door appeared for an instant the ayah as she had set down her charge, and Mrs. Gilsland, gracious but formidable, in her rustling gown, who had headed the procession. Poor woman, she meant no harm, but it was not in the heart of woman to believe that in the genial hour after dinner, when all the inner and the outer man was mollified and comforted, the sight of three such "bonnie boys," all curled, brushed, and shining for the occasion, could disturb Mr. Ochterlony. Baby Wilfrid dashed across the room in a straight line with "flicherin' noise and glee" to get to his mother, and the others fol-

lowed, not, however, without stoppages on the way. They were bonnie boys—brave, little, erect, clear-eyed creatures, who had never known anything but love in their lives, and feared not the face of man; and to Mary, though she quaked and trembled, their sudden appearance changed the face of everything, and made the Earlston drawing-room glorious. But the effect was different upon Mr. Ochterlony, as might be supposed.

"How do you do, my little man," said the discomfited uncle. Oh, this is Hugh, is it? I think he is like his father. I suppose you intend to send them to school. Good heavens! my little fellow, take care!" cried Mr. Ochterlony. The cause of this sudden animation was, that Hugh, naturally facing his uncle when he was addressed by him, had leant upon the pillar on which Pysche stood with her immortal lover. He had put his arm round it with a vague sense of admiration, and as he stood was, as Mary thought, a prettier sight than even the lovely group above; but Mr. Ochterlony could not be expected to be of Mary's mind.

"Come here, Hugh," said his mother, anxiously. "You must not touch anything; your uncle will kindly let you look at them, but you must not touch. It was so different, you know, in our

Indian house—and then on board ship," said Mary, faltering. Islay, with his big head thrown back a little, and his hands in his little trousers pockets, was roving about all the while in a manly way, inspecting everything, looking, as his mother thought, for the most favourable opening for mischief. What was she to do? They might do more damage in ten minutes than ten years of her little income could set right. As for Mr. Ochterlony, though he groaned in spirit, nothing could overcome his politeness; he turned his back upon little Hugh, so that at least he might not see what was going on, and resumed the conversation with all the composure that he could assume.

"You will send them to school of course," he said; "we must inquire for a good school for them. I don't myself think that children can begin their education too soon. I don't speak of the baby," said Mr. Ochterlony, with a sigh. The baby evidently was inevitable. Mary had set him down at her feet, and he sat there in a peaceable way, making no assault upon anything, which was consolatory at least.

"They are so young," said Mary, tremulously.

"Yes, they are young, and it is all the better," said the uncle. His eye was upon Islay, who had sprung upon a chair, and was riding and

spurring it with delightful energy. Naturally, it was a unique rococo chair of the daintiest and most fantastic workmanship, and the unhappy owner expected to see it fall into sudden destruction before his eyes; but he was benumbed by politeness and despair, and took no notice. "There is nothing," said the poor man with distracted attention, his eye upon Islay, his face turned to his sister-in-law, and horror in his heart, "like good training begun early. For my part——"

"Oh, mamma, look here. How funny this is!" cried little Hugh. When Mary turned sharply round in despair, she found her boy standing behind her with a priceless Etruscan vase in his hand. He had just taken it from the top of a low, carved bookcase, where the companion vase still stood, and held it tilted up as he might have held a drinking mug in the nursery. "It's a fight," cried Hugh; "look mamma, how that fellow is putting his lance into him. Isn't it jolly? Why don't *we* have some brown sort of jugs with battles on them, like this?"

"What is it? Let *me* see," cried Islay, and he gave a flying leap, and brought the rococo chair down on its back, where he remounted leisurely after he had cast a glance at the brown sort of jug. "I don't think it's worth looking at," said

the four-year-old hero. Mrs. Ochterlony heard her brother-in-law say, "Good heavens!" again, and heard him groan as he turned away his head. He could not forget that they were his guests and his dead brother's children, and he could not turn them out of the room or the house, as he was tempted to do; but at the same time he turned away that at least he might not see the full extent of the ruin. As for Mary, she felt her own hand tremble as she took the vase out of Hugh's careless grasp. She was terrified to touch its brittle beauty, though she was not so enthusiastic about it as, perhaps, she ought to have been. And it was with a sudden impulse of desperation that she caught up her baby, and lifted Islay off the prostrate chair.

"I hope you will excuse them," she said, all flushed and trembling. "They are so little, and they know no better. But they must not stay here," and with that poor Mary swept them out with her, making her way painfully over the dangerous path, where snares and perils lay on every side. She gave the astonished Islay an involuntary "shake" as she dropped him in the sombre corridor outside, and hurried along towards the darkling nursery. The little flock of wicked black sheep trotted by her side full of questions and surprise. "Why are we coming away? What

have we done?" said Hugh. "Mamma! mamma! tell me!" and Islay pulled at her dress, and made more demonstratively the same demand. What had they done? If Mr. Ochterlony, left by himself in the drawing-room, could but have answered the question! He was on his knees beside his injured chair, examining its wounds, and as full of tribulation as if those fantastic bits of tortured wood had been flesh and blood. And to tell the truth, the misfortune was greater than if it had been flesh and blood. If Islay Ochterlony's sturdy little legs had been broken, there was a doctor in the parish qualified to a certain extent to mend them. But who was there among the Shap Fells, or within a hundred miles of Earlston, who was qualified to touch the delicate members of a rococo chair? He groaned over it as it lay prostrate, and would not be comforted. Children! imps! come to be the torture of his life, as, no doubt, they had been of poor Hugh's. What could Providence be thinking of to send such reckless, heedless, irresponsible creatures into the world? A vague notion that their mother would whip them all round as soon as she got them into the shelter of the nursery, gave Mr. Ochterlony a certain consolation; but even that judicial act, though a relief to injured feeling, would do nothing for the fractured chair.

Mary, we regret to say, did not whip the boys when she got into her own apartments. They deserved it, no doubt, but she was only a weak woman. Instead of that, she put her arms round the three, who were much excited and full of wonder, and very restless in her clasp, and cried —not much, but suddenly, in an outburst of misery and desolation. After all, what was the vase or the Psyche in comparison with the living creatures thus banished to make place for them? which was a reflection which some people may be far from acquiescing in, but that came natural to her, being their mother, and not in any special way interested in art. She cried, but she only hugged her boys and kissed them, and put them to bed, lingering that she might not have to go downstairs again till the last moment. When she went at last, and made Mr. Ochterlony's tea for him, that magnanimous man did not say a word, and even accepted her apologies with a feeble deprecation. He had put the wounded article away, and made a sublime resolution to take no further notice. "Poor thing, it is not her fault," he said to himself; and, indeed, had begun to be sorry for Mary, and to think what a pity it was that a woman so unobjectionable should have three such imps to keep her in hot water. But he looked sad, as was natural. He

swallowed his tea with a sigh, and made mournful cadences to every sentence he uttered. A man does not easily get over such a shock;—it is different with a frivolous and volatile woman, who may forget or may dissimulate, and look as if she does not care; but a man is not so lightly moved or mended. If it had been Islay's legs, as has been said, there was a doctor within reach; but who in the north country could be trusted so much as to look at the delicate limbs of a rococo chair?

CHAPTER XIII.

THE experience of this evening, though it was only the second of her stay at Earlston, proved to Mary that the visit she was paying to her brother-in-law must be made as short as possible. She could not get up and run away because Hugh had put an Etruscan vase in danger, and Islay had broken his uncle's chair. It was Mr. Ochterlony who was the injured party, and he was magnanimously silent, saying nothing, and even giving no intimation that the presence of these objectionable little visitors was not to be desired in the drawing-room; and Mary had to stay and keep her boys out of sight, and live consciously upon sufferance, in the nursery and her bedroom, until she could feel warranted in taking leave of her brother-in-law, who, without doubt, meant to be kind. It was a strange sort of position, and strangely out of accord with her character and habits. She had never been rich, nor lived in

such a great house, but she had always up to this time been her own mistress—mistress of her actions, free to do what she thought best, and to manage her children according to her own wishes. Now she had, to a certain extent, to submit to the housekeeper, who changed their hours, and interfered with their habits at her pleasure. The poor ayah went weeping away, and nobody was to be had to replace her except one of the Earlston maids, who naturally was more under Mrs. Gilsland's authority than Mrs. Ochterlony's; and to this girl Mary had to leave them when she went down to the inevitable dinner which had always to be eaten downstairs. She made several attempts to consult her brother-in-law upon her future, but Mr. Ochterlony, though very polite, was not a sympathetic listener. He had received the few details which she had been moved at first, with restrained tears, to give him about the Major, with a certain restlessness which chilled Mary. He was sorry for his brother; but he was one of those men who do not care to talk about dead people, and who think it best not to revive and recall sorrow—which would be very true and just if true sorrow had any occasion to be revived and recalled; and her own arrangements were all more or less connected with this (as Mr. Ochterlony called it) painful subject.

And thus it was that her hesitating efforts to make her position clear to him, and to get any advice which he could give, was generally put aside or swallowed up in some communication from the Numismatic Society, or questions which she could not answer about Indian art.

"We must leave Earlston soon," Mrs. Ochterlony took courage to say one day, when the housekeeper, and the continued exclusion of the children, and her own curious life on sufferance, had been too much for her. "If you are at leisure, would you let me speak to you about it? I have so little experience of anything but India —and I want to do what is best for my boys."

"Oh—ah—yes," said Mr. Ochterlony, "you must send them to school. We must try and hear of some good school for them. It is the only thing you can do——"

"But they are so young," said Mary. "At their age they are surely best with their mother. Hugh is only seven. If you could advise me where it would be best to go——"

"Where it would be best to go!" said Mr. Ochterlony. He was a little surprised, and not quite pleased for the moment. "I hope you do not find yourself uncomfortable here?"

"Oh, no," said Mary, faltering; "but—they are very young and troublesome, and—I am sure

they must worry you. Such little children are best by themselves," she said, trying to smile—and thus, by chance, touched a chord of pity in her brother-in-law's heart.

"Ah," he said, shaking his head, "I assure you I feel the painfulness of your position. If you had been unencumbered, you might have looked forward to so different a life; but with such a burden as these children, and you so young still——"

"Burden?" said Mary; and it may be supposed how her eyes woke up, and what a colour came to her cheek, and how her heart took to beating under her crape. "You can't really think *my* children are a burden to me? Ah! you don't know——I would not care to live another day if I had not my boys."

And here, her nerves being weak with all she had come through, she would have liked to cry—but did not, the moment being unsuitable, and only sat facing the virtuoso, all lighted up and glowing, brightened by indignation, and surprise, and sudden excitement, to something more like the former Mary than ever yet had been seen underneath her widow's cap.

"Oh!" said Mr. Ochterlony. He could have understood the excitement had it been about a Roman camp or a newly-discovered statue; but boys did not commend themselves in the same

way to his imagination. He liked his sister-in-law, however, in his way. She was a good listener, and pleasant to look at, and even when she was unintelligible was never without grace, or out of drawing, and he felt disposed even to take a little trouble for her. "You *must* send them to school," he said. "There is nothing else to be done. I will write to a friend of mine who knows about such matters; and I am sure, for my part, I shall be very glad if you can make yourself comfortable at Earlston—you and—and the baby, of course," Mr. Ochterlony said, with a slightly wry face. The innocent man had not an idea of the longing she had for that cottage with the fire in it. It was a notion which never could have been made intelligible to him, even had he been told in words.

"Thank you," said Mary, faltering more and more; indeed she made a dead pause, and he thought she had accepted his decision, and that there was to be no more about it—which was comforting and satisfactory. He had just risen up to leave the room, breakfast being over, when she put out her hand to stop him. "I will not detain you a minute," she said, "it is so desolate to have no one to tell me what to do. Indeed, we cannot stay here—though it is so good of you; they are too young to leave me, and I care for nothing else in life," Mrs. Ochterlony said,

yielding for an instant to her emotion; but she soon recovered herself. "There are good schools all over England, I have heard; in places where we could live cheaply. That is what I want to do. Near one of the good grammar schools. I am quite free; it does not matter where I live. If you would give me your advice," she added, timidly. Mr. Ochterlony, for his part, was taken so much by surprise that he stood between the table and the door, with one foot raised to go on, and not believing his ears. He had behaved like an angel, to his own conviction, and had never said a word about the chair, though it had to be sent to town to be repaired. He had continued to afford shelter to the little ruffian who did it, and had carefully abstained from all expression of his feelings. What could the woman want more?—and what should he know about grammar-schools, and places where people could live cheaply? A woman, too, whom he liked, and had explained his theory of ancient art more fully to than he had ever done to any one. And she wanted to leave Earlston and his society, and the Psyches and Venuses, to settle down in some half-pay neighbourhood, where people with large families lived for the sake of education. No wonder Mr. Ochterlony turned round, struck dumb with wonder, and came slowly back before

giving his opinion, which, but for an unexpected circumstance, would no doubt have been such an opinion as to overwhelm his companion with confusion, and put an instant stop to her foolish plans.

But circumstances come wildly in the way of the best intentions, and cut off the wisest speech sometimes on a man's very lips. At this moment the door opened softly, and a new interlocutor presented herself. The apparition was one which took not only the words but the very breath from the lips of the master of Earlston. Aunt Agatha was twenty years older than her niece, but so was Francis Ochterlony; and such a thing was once possible as that the soft ancient maiden and the elderly solitary dilettante might have made a cheerful human household at Earlston. They had not met for years, not since the time when Miss Seton was holding on by her lingering youth, and looking forward to the loss of it with an anxious and care-worn countenance. She was twenty times prettier now than she had been in those days—prettier perhaps, if the truth were told, than she ever had been in her life. She was penitent, too, and tearful in her white-haired sweetness, though Mr. Ochterlony did not know why—with a soft colour coming and going on her cheeks, and a wistful look in her dewy eyes. She had left her home

at least two hours before, and came carrying all the freshness and odours of the morning, surrounded with sunshine and sweet air, and everything that seems to belong to the young. Francis Ochterlony was so bewildered by the sight that he stepped back out of her way, and could not have told whether she was eighteen or fifty. Perhaps the sight of him had in some degree the same effect upon Aunt Agatha. She made a little rush at Mary, who had risen to meet her, and threw herself, soft little woman as she was, upon her niece's taller form. "Oh, my dear love, I have been a silly old woman—forgive me!" said Aunt Agatha. She had put up with the estrangement as long as ever it was in human nature to put up with it. She had borne Peggy's sneers, and Winnie's heartless suggestions that it was her own doing. How was Winnie to know what made it so difficult for her to have any communications with Earlston? But finally Aunt Agatha's heart had conquered everything else. She had made such pictures to herself of Mary, solitary and friendless ("for what is a Man? no company when one is unhappy," Miss Seton had said to herself with unconscious eloquence), until instinct and impulse drove her to this decided step. The hall door at Earlston had been standing open, and there was nobody to announce her.

And this was how Aunt Agatha arrived just at the critical moment, cutting off Mr. Ochterlony's utterance when he was on the very point of speech.

The poor man, for his part, did not know what to do; after the first moment of amaze he stood dumb and humble, with his hand stretched out, waiting to greet his unexpected visitor. But the truth was, that the two women as they clung together were both so dreadfully disposed to cry that they dared not face Mr. Ochterlony. The sudden touch of love and unlooked-for sympathy had this effect upon Mary, who had been agitated and disturbed before; and as for Aunt Agatha, she was not an old maid by conviction, and perhaps would not have objected to this house or its master, and the revival of these old associations was hard upon her. She clasped Mary tight, as if it was all for Mary's sake; but perhaps there was also a little personal feeling involved. Mr. Ochterlony stood speechless for a moment, and then he heard a faint sob, and fled in consternation. If that was coming, it was high time for him to go. He went away and took refuge in his library, in a confused and uncomfortable state of mind. This was the result of having a woman in the house; a man who had nothing to do in his own person with the opposite half of humanity became subject to the

invasion of other women, and still worse, to the invasion of recollections and feelings which he had no wish to have recalled. What did Agatha Seton mean by looking so fresh and fair at her age? and yet she had white hair too, and called herself an old woman. These thoughts came dreadfully in his way when he sat down to work. He was writing a monograph upon Icelandic art, and naturally had been much interested in a subject so characteristic and exciting; but somehow after that glimpse of his old love his mind would not stick to his theme. The two women clinging together, though one of them had a bonnet on, made a pretty "subject." He was not mediæval, to speak of, but rather classical in his tastes; yet it did strike him that a painter might have taken an idea for a Visitation out of that embrace. And so that was how Agatha Seton looked when she was an old woman! This idea fluttered in and out before his mind's eye, and threw such reflections upon his paper as came dreadfully in the way of his monograph. He lost his notes and forgot his researches in the bewilderment produced by it; for, to tell the truth, Agatha Seton was in a very much finer state of preservation, not to say fairer to look upon, than most of the existing monuments of Icelandic art.

"He has gone away," said Aunt Agatha, who was aware of that fact sooner than Mary was, though Mrs. Ochterlony's face was towards her brother-in-law; and she gave Mary a sudden hug and subsided into that good cry, which is such a relief and comfort to the mind; Mary's tears came too, but they were fewer and not by any means so satisfactory as Aunt Agatha's, who was crying for nothing particular. "Oh, my dear love, don't think me a wretch," the old lady said. "I have never been able to get you out of my head, standing there on the platform all by yourself with the dear children; and I, like an old monster, taking offence and going away and leaving you! If it is any comfort to you, Mary, my darling, I have been wretched ever since. I tried to write, but I could not write. So now I've come to ask you to forgive me; and where are my dear, dear, darling boys?"

The poor little boys! Mary's heart gave a little leap to hear some one once more talk of those poor children as if they were not in the way. "Mr. Ochterlony is very kind," she said, not answering directly; "but we must not stay, Aunt Agatha, we cannot stay. He is not used to children, you know, and they worry him. Oh, if I had but any little place of my own!"

"You shall come to me, my darling love," said Aunt Agatha in triumph. "You should have come to me from the first. I am not saying anything against Francis Ochterlony. I never did; people might think he did not quite behave as was expected; but I am sure I never said a word against him. But how can a Man understand? or what can you look for from them? My dearest Mary, you must come to me!"

"Thank you, Aunt Agatha," said Mary, doubtfully. "You are very kind—you are all very kind"—and then she repeated, under her breath, that longing aspiration, "Oh, that I had but any little place of my very own!"

"Yes, my love, that is what we must do," said Aunt Agatha. "I would take you with me if I could, or I would take the dear boys with me. Nobody will be worried by them at the cottage. Oh, Mary, my darling, I never would say anything against poor dear Hugh, or encourage you to keep his relations at a distance; but just at this moment, my dear love, I did think it was most natural that you should go to your own friends."

"I think when one has little children one should be by one's-self," said Mary, "it is more natural. If I could get a little cottage near you, Aunt Agatha——"

"My love, mine is a little cottage," said Miss Seton; "it is not half nor quarter so big as Earlston—have you forgotten? and we are all a set of women together, and the dear boys will rule over us. Ah, Mary, you must come to me!" said the soft old lady. And after that she went up to the dim Earlston nursery, and kissed and hugged the tabooed children, whom it was the object of Mary's life to keep out of the way. But there was a struggle in Aunt Agatha's gentle bosom when she heard of the Etruscan vase and the rococo chair. Her heart yearned a little over the pretty things thus put in peril, for she had a few pretty things herself which were dear to her. Her alarm, however, was swallowed up by a stronger emotion. It was natural for a woman to take thought for such things, but it went to her heart to think of "poor Francis," once her hero, in such a connexion. "You see he has nothing else to care for," she said—and the fair old maiden paused and gave a furtive sigh over the poor old bachelor, who might have been so different. "It was his own fault," she added to herself, softly; but still the idea of Francis Ochterlony "wrapped up," as Miss Seton expressed it, in chairs and vases, gave a shock to her gentle spirit. It was righteous retribution, but still Aunt Agatha was a woman, and pitiful.

She was still more moved when Mary took her into the drawing-room, where there were so many beautiful things. She looked upon them with silent and reverent admiration, but still not without a personal reference. "So that is all he cares for, now-a-days," she said, with a sigh; and it was just at the same moment that Mr. Ochterlony, in his study, disturbed by visions of two women in his peaceable house, gave up his monograph on Icelandic art in despair.

This, it may be said, was how Mrs. Ochterlony's first experiment terminated. She did not leave Earlston at once, but she did so shortly after—without any particular resistance on the part of her brother-in-law. After Aunt Agatha's visit, Mr. Ochterlony's thoughts took a different turn. He was very civil to her before she left, as indeed it was his nature to be to all women, and showed her his collections, and paid her a certain alarmed and respectful deference. But after that he did not do anything to detain Mary in his house. Where one woman was, other women were pretty sure to come, and nobody could tell what unseen visitants might enter along with them, to disturb a man in his occupations, and startle him out of his tranquillity. He never had the heart to resume that monograph on Icelandic art—which was a great loss

to the Society of Antiquaries and the æsthetic world in general; and though he had no advice in particular to give to his sister-in-law as to her future movements, he did not say anything further to deter her from leaving Earlston. "I hope you will let me know what your movements are, and where you decide upon settling," he said, as he shook hands with her very gravely at the carriage door, "and if I can be of any use." And this was how the first experiment came to an end.

Then Mrs. Ochterlony kissed her boys when they were fairly out of the grey shadow of their uncle's house, and shed a few tears over them. "Now at least I shall not have to keep my bonnie boys out of the way any more," said Mary. But she caught sight again of the cheery cottage, with the fire burning within, and the hospitable door open, as she drove down to the railway; and her heart longed to alight and take possession, and find herself at home. When should she be at home? or was there no such place left in the world? But happily she had no maid, and no time to think or calculate probabilities—and thus she set out upon her second venture, among "her own friends."

CHAPTER XIV.

AUNT AGATHA'S cottage was very different from Earlston. It was a woman's house, and bore that character written all over it. The Pysche and the Venus would have been dreadfully out of place in it, it is true, but yet there was not a spot left vacant where an ornament could be; little fanciful shelves nestled into all the corners—which it was a great comfort to Mary's mind to see were just above her boys' range—bearing little vases, and old teacups and curiosities of all kinds, not valuable like Francis Ochterlony's, nor chosen with such refined taste, but yet dear to Aunt Agatha's heart. Nothing so precious as the ware of Henri II. had ever come in Miss Seton's way; but she had one or two trifling articles that were real Wedgewood, and she had some bits of genuine Sèvres, and a great deal of pretty rubbish, which answered the

be in Aunt Agatha's nature, had been calmed down by the awe-inspiring presence of Peggy, and the comfort of perceiving nothing but satisfaction in that difficult woman's countenance. The baby had behaved himself like an angel, and had made no objections whatever to the cap or features of his new guardian; and Peggy, too, was visible from the open windows walking up and down the garden with little Wilfrid in her arms, in all the glory of content. This sight brought Miss Seton's comfort to a climax, as it did Mary's. She came and took her niece's hand, and sat down beside her with a tearful joy.

"Ah, Mary, this is what ought to have been from the very first," she said; "this is different from Francis Ochterlony and his dreary house. The dear children will be happy here."

"Yes, it is very different," said Mary, returning the pressure of the soft little white hand; but her heart was full, and she could not find much more to say.

"And you, too, my dear love," Aunt Agatha went on, who was not a wise woman, looking into the new-comer's face—"you, too Mary, my darling—you will try to be happy in your old home? Well, dear, never mind answering me—I ought to know it is not the same for you as for us. I can't help feeling so happy to have

you and the dear children. Look at Winnie, how delighted she is—she is so fond of children, though you would not think so just at first. Doesn't it make you feel the difference, Mary, to think you left her a baby, as one may say, and find her grown up into such a great girl?"

"I have so many things to make me feel the difference," said Mary—for Miss Seton was not one of those people who can do without an answer; and then Aunt Agatha was very sorry, and kissed her, with tears in her eyes.

"Yes, my love—yes, my dear love;" she said, as if she were soothing a child. "It was very foolish of me to use that expression; but you must try not to mind me, Mary. Cry, my dear, or don't answer me, or do just as you please. I never mean to say anything to recall ——Look at the dear boys, how delighted they are. I know they will be fond of Winnie—she has such a nice way with children. Don't you think she has a very nice way?"

"She is very handsome," said Mary, looking out wistfully upon the young imperious creature, whose stage of existence seemed the very antipodes of her own.

"My dear love, she is beautiful," said Aunt Agatha. "Sir Edward told me he had never, even at court—and you know he was a great

deal about the court in his young days—seen any one that promised to be such a beautiful woman. And to think she should just be our Winnie all the same! And so simple and sweet—such a perfect child with it all! You may wonder how I have kept her so long," continued Winnie's adoring guardian, "when you were married, Mary, before you were her age."

Mrs. Ochterlony tried hard to look up with the look of inquiry and interest which was expected of her in Aunt Agatha's face; but she could not. It was difficult enough to struggle with the recollections that hung about this place, without having them thrust continually in her face in this affectionately heartless way. Thus the wheel turned softly round again, and the reality of the situation crept out in bare outline from under the cloak of flowers and tenderness, as hard and clear as at Earlston. Mary's grief was her own concern, and not of very much consequence to anybody else in the world. She had no right to forget that fact, and yet she did forget it, not being used yet to stand alone. While Aunt Agatha, on her side, could not but think it was rather hard-hearted of Mary to show so little interest in her own sister, and such a sister as Winnie.

"It is not because she is not appreciated,"

Miss Seton went on, feeling all the more bound to celebrate her favourite's praises, "but I am so anxious she should make a good choice. She is not a girl that could marry anybody, you know. She has her own little ways, and such a great deal of character. I cannot tell you what a comfort it is to me, Mary, my dear love, to think that now we shall have your experience to guide us," Aunt Agatha added, melting into tenderness again.

"I am afraid experience is good for very little in such cases," said Mary, "but I hope there will be no guidance needed—she seems very happy now."

"To tell the truth, there is somebody at the Hall—" said Aunt Agatha, "and I want to have your opinion, my dear. Oh, Mary, you must not talk of no guidance being needed. I have watched over her ever since she was born. The wind has never blown roughly on her; and if my darling was to marry just an ordinary man, and be unhappy, perhaps—or no happier than the rest of us—" said Aunt Agatha, with a sigh. This last touch of nature went to Mary's heart.

"She is rich in having such love, whatever may happen to her," said Mrs. Ochterlony, "and she looks as if, after all, she might yet have the

perfect life. She is very, very handsome—and good, I am sure, and sweet—or she would not be your child, Aunt Agatha; but we must not be too ready with our guidance. She would not be happy if her choice did not come spontaneously, and of itself."

"But oh, my dear love, the risk of marrying!" said Miss Seton, with a little sob—and she gave again a nervous pressure to Mary's hand, and did not restrain her tears. They sat thus in the twilight together, looking out upon the young living creatures for whom life was all brightly uncertain—one of them regarding with a pitiful flutter of dread and anxiety the world she had never ventured to enter into for herself. Perhaps a vision of Francis Ochterlony mingled with Miss Seton's thoughts, and a wistful backward glance at the life which might have been, but had not. The other sat very still, holding Aunt Agatha's soft little fluttering hand in her own, which was steady, and did not tremble, with a strange pang of anguish and pity in her heart. Mary looked at life through no such fanciful mists—she knew, as she thought, its deepest depth and profoundest calamity; but the fountain of her tears was all sealed up and closed, because nobody but herself had any longer anything to do with it. And she, too, yearned over the

young creature whose existence was all to come, and felt that it was hard to think that she might be "no happier than the rest of us." It was these words which had arrested Mary, who, perhaps, might have otherwise thought that her own unquestionable sorrows demanded more sympathy than Winnie's problematical future. Thus the two elder ladies sat, until Winnie and the children came in, bringing life and commotion with them. The blackbird was still singing in the bushes, the soft northern twilight lingering, and the dew falling, and all the sweet evening odours coming in. As for Aunt Agatha, her heart, though it was old, fluttered with all the agitation and disturbance of a girl's—while Mary, in the calm and silence of her loneliness, felt herself put back as it were into history, along with Ruth and Rachel, and her own mother, and all the women whose lives had been and were over. This was how it felt to her in the presence of Aunt Agatha's soft agitation—so that she half smiled at herself sitting there composed and tranquil, and soothing her companion into her usual calm.

"Mary agrees with me that this is better than Earlston, Winnie," said Aunt Agatha, when the children were all disposed of for the night, and the three who were so near to each other in

blood, and who were henceforward to be close companions, yet who knew so little of each other in deed and truth, were left alone. The lamp was lighted, but the windows were still open, and the twilight still lingered, and a wistful blue-green sky looked in and put itself in swift comparison with the yellow lamplight. Winnie stood in one of the open windows, half in and half out, looking across the garden, as if expecting some one, and with a little contraction in her forehead that marred her fine profile slightly—giving a kind of careless half-attention to what was said.

"Does she?" she answered, indifferently; "I should have thought Earlston was a much handsomer house."

"It was not of handsome houses we were thinking, my darling," said Aunt Agatha, with soft reproof; "it was of love and welcome like what we are so glad as to give her here."

"Wasn't Mr. Ochterlony kind?" said Winnie, with half contempt. "Perhaps he does not fancy children. I don't wonder so very much at that. If they were not my own nephews, very likely I should think them dreadful little wretches. I suppose Mary wont mind me saying what I think. I always have been brought up to speak out."

"They are dear children," said poor Aunt Agatha, promptly. "I wish you would come in, my love. It is a great deal too late now to go out."

And at that moment Mary, who was the spectator, and could observe what was going on, had her attention attracted by a little jar and rattle of the window at which Winnie was standing. It was the girl's impatient movement which had done it; and whether it was in obedience to Miss Seton's mild command, or something more urgent, Winnie came in instantly with a lowering brow, and shut the window with some noise and sharpness. Probably Aunt Agatha was used to it, for she took no notice; but even her patient spirit seemed moved to astonishment by the sudden clang of the shutters, which the hasty young woman began to close.

"Leave that to Peggy, my darling," she said; "besides, it was nice to have the air, and you know how I like the last of the gloaming. That is the window where one can always see poor Sir Edward's light when he is at home. I suppose they are sure to be at home, since they have not come here to-night."

"Shall I open the window again, and let you look at the light, since you like it so much?"

said the undutiful Winnie. "I closed it for that. I don't like to have anybody staring down at us in that superior sort of way—as if we cared; and I am sure nobody here was looking for them to-night."

"No, my dear, of course not," said Miss Seton. "Sir Edward is far too much of a gentleman to think of coming the night that Mary was expected home."

And then Winnie involuntarily turned half-round, and darted upon Mary an inquiring defiant look out of her stormy eyes. The look seemed to say, "So it was you who were the cause of it!" and then she swept past her sister with her streaming ribbons, and pulled out an embroidery frame which stood in a corner, and sat down to it in an irritated restless way. In that pretty room, in the soft evening atmosphere, beside the gentle old aunt, who was folding her soft hands in the sweet leisure that became her age, and the fair, mature, but saddened presence of the elder sister, who was resting in the calm of her exhaustion, a beautiful girl bending over an embroidery frame was just the last touch of perfection needed by the scene; but nobody would have thought so to see how Winnie threw herself down to her work, and dashed at it, all because of the innocent light that had been

lighted in Sir Edward's window. Aunt Agatha did her best, by impressive looks and coughs, and little gestures, and transparently significant words, to subdue the spoilt child into good behaviour; and then, in despair, she thought herself called upon to explain.

"Sir Edward very often walks over of an evening," she said, edging herself as it were between Mary and her sister. "We are always glad to see him, you know. It is a little change; and then he has some nice young friends who stay with him occasionally," said the deceitful woman. "But to be sure, he has too much feeling to think of making his appearance on the night of your coming home."

"I hope you will make no difference for me," said Mary.

"My love, I hope I know what is proper," said Aunt Agatha, with her little air of decision. And once more Winnie gave her sister a defiant, accusing glance. "It is I that will be the sufferer, and it is all on your account," this look said, and the beautiful profile marked itself out upon the wall with that contraction across the forehead which took away half its loveliness. And then an uncomfortable silence ensued. Mrs. Ochterlony could say nothing more in a matter of which she knew so little, and Aunt

Agatha, though she was the most yielding of guardians, still came to a point of propriety now and then on which she would not give way. This was how Mary discovered that instead of the Arcadian calm and retirement of which the cottage seemed an ideal resting place, she had come into another little centre of agitated human life, where her presence made a jar and discord without any fault of hers.

But it would have been worse than ungrateful. it would have been heartless and unkind, to have expressed such a feeling. So she, who was the stranger, had to put force on herself, and talk and lead her two companions back, so far as that was possible, from their pre-occupation; but at the best it was an unsatisfactory and forced conversation, and Mrs. Ochterlony was but too glad to own herself tired, and to leave her aunt and sister to themselves. They had given her their best room, with the fresh chintz and the pictures. They had made every arrangement for her comfort that affection and thoughtful care could suggest. What they had not been able to do was to let her come into their life without disturbing it, without introducing forced restrictions and new rules, without, in short, making her, all innocently and unwittingly on both sides, the discord in the house. Thus

Mary found that, without changing her position. she had simply changed the scene; and the thought made her heart sick.

When Mrs. Ochterlony had retired, the two ladies of the cottage said nothing to each other for some time. Winnie continued her work in the same restless way as she had begun and poor Aunt Agatha took up a book, which trembled in her hand. The impetuous girl had thrown open the window when she was reproved for closing it, and the light in Sir Edward's window shone far off on the tree tops, shedding an irritating influence upon Winnie when she looked up; and at the same time she could see the book shaking in Aunt Agatha's hand. Winnie was very fond of the guardian of her youth, and would have indignantly declared herself incapable of doing anything to vex her; but at the same time there could be no doubt that Aunt Agatha's nervousness gave a certain satisfaction to the young tyrant who ruled over her. Winnie saw that she was suffering, and could not help feeling pleased, for had not she too suffered all the evening? And she made no attempt to speak, or to take any initiative, so that it was only after Miss Seton had borne it as long as she was capable of bearing it, that the silence was broken at last.

"Dear Winnie," said Aunt Agatha, with a faltering voice, "I think, when you think of it, that you will not think you have been quite considerate in making poor Mary uncomfortable the first night."

"Mary feel uncomfortable?" cried Winnie. "Good gracious, Aunt Agatha, is one never to hear of anything but Mary? What has anybody done? I have been sitting working all the evening, like—like a dressmaker or poor needlewoman; does she object to that, I wonder?" and the young rebel put her frame back into its corner, and rose to the fray. Sir Edward's window still threw its distant light over the tree tops, and the sight of it made her smouldering passion blaze.

"Oh, my dear, you know that was not what I meant," said the disturbed and agitated aunt.

"I wish then, please, you would say what you mean," said Winnie. "She would not come with us at first, when we were all ready for her, and then she would not stay at Earlston after going there of her own will. I dare say she made Mr. Ochterlony's life wretched with her trouble and widow's cap. Why didn't she be burnt with her Major, and be done with it?" said Winnie. "I am sure it would be by far the most comfortable way."

"Oh, Winnie, I thought you would have had a little sympathy for your sister," said Aunt Agatha, with tears.

"Everybody has sympathy for my sister," said Winnie, "from Peggy up to Sir Edward. I don't see why she should have it all. Hasn't she had her day? Nobody came in upon her, when she was my age, to put the house in mourning, and banish all one's friends. I hate injustice," cried the young revolutionary. "It is the injustice that makes me angry. I tell you, Aunt Agatha, she has had her day."

"Oh, Winnie," cried Miss Seton, weeping—"Oh, my darling child! don't be so hard upon poor Mary. When she was your age she had not half nor quarter the pleasures you have; and it was I that said she ought to come among her own friends."

"I am sure she would be a great deal better in some place of her own," said Winnie, with a little violence. "I wonder how she can go to other people's houses with all that lot of little children. If I should ever come home a widow from India, or anywhere else——"

"Winnie!" cried Aunt Agatha, with a little scream, "for Heaven's sake, don't say such things. Sorrow comes soon enough, without going to meet it; and if we can give her a little

repose, poor dear—— And what do a few pleasant evenings signify to you at your time of life?"

"A few pleasant evenings!" said Winnie; and she gave a kind of gasp, and threw herself into a chair, and cried too, for passion, and vexation, and disgust—perhaps, a little, too, out of self-disgust, though she would not acknowledge it. "As if that were all! And nobody thinks how the days are flying, and how it may all come to an end!" cried the passionate girl. After having given vent to such words, shame and remorse seized upon Winnie. Her cheeks blazed so that the scorching heat dried up her tears, and she sprang up again and flew at the shutters, on which her feelings had already expended themselves more than once, and brought down the bar with a clang that startled the whole house. As for Aunt Agatha, she sat aghast, and gazed, and could not believe her eyes or her ears. What were the days that were flying, or the things that might come to an end? Could this wild exclamation have anything to do with the fact that Captain Percival was only on a visit at the Hall, and that his days were, so to speak, numbered? Miss Seton was not so old as to have forgotten what it was to be thus on the eve of losing sight of some

one who had, as she would herself have said, "interested you." But Aunt Agatha had never in her life been guilty of violence or passion, and the idea of committing such a sin against all propriety and good taste as to have her usual visitors while the family was in affliction, was something which she could not take into her mind. It looked a breach of morals to Miss Seton; and for the moment it actually seemed as if Winnie, for the first time in her life, was not to have her way.

CHAPTER XV.

"EVERYBODY has sympathy with my sister," was what Winnie had said; and perhaps that was the hardest thing of all to bear. She was like the respectable son who came in disgusted into the midst of a merry-making all consecrated to the return of his disreputable prodigal brother. What did the fellow mean by coming home? Why did not he stay where he was, and fill his belly with the husks? If Mary had but been left to her young sister's sympathy, Winnie would (or thought she would) have lavished tenderness upon her. But the fact was, that it was very very hard to think how the days were passing by, and how perhaps all the precious evenings which remained might be cut off for ever, and its fairest prospect taken from her life, by Aunt Agatha's complaisance to Mary. It was true that it was Captain Percival's

visit that Winnie was thinking of. Perhaps it was a little unmaidenly of her to own as much even to herself. It was a thing which Aunt Agatha would have died sooner than do, and which even Mary could not have been guilty of; but then girls now are brought up so differently. He might find himself shut out from the house, and might think the "family affliction" only a pretence, and might go away and make an end of it for ever—and Winnie was self-willed and passionate, and felt she must move heaven and earth sooner than let this be so. It seemed to her as if the happiness of her life hung upon it, and she could not but think, being young and fond of poetry, of the many instances in books in which the magical moment was thus lost, and two lives made miserable. And how could it harm Mary to see a strange face or two about; she who had had the fortitude to come home all the way from India, and had survived, and was in sufficiently good health after her grief, which of itself was a thing for which the critic of eighteen was disposed to despise a woman?

As she brooded over this at night in her own room with the window open, and her long hair streaming over her shoulders like a romantic heroine, and the young moonlight whitening over the trees, turrets, and windows of the Hall, a

wild impatience of all the restrictions which were at that moment pressing upon her came upon Winnie. She had been very bright and pleasant with the little boys in the garden; which was partly because her heart melted towards the helpless children who were her own flesh and blood, and partly because at that time nothing had occurred to thwart or vex her; but from the moment when she had seen Sir Edward's window suddenly gleam into the twilight matters had changed. Then Winnie had perceived that the event which had been the central point of her daily life for some time back, the visit of Sir Edward and his "young friend," was not going to happen. It was the first time it had occurred to her that Mary's arrival was in any way to limit or transform her own existence; and her pride, her independence, her self-love and self-will were all immediately in arms. She, who had a little scorned her sister for the faculty of surviving, and for the steadiness with which she bore her burden, now asked herself indignantly, if Mary wanted to devote herself to her grief why she did not go into some seclusion to do it, instead of imposing penance upon other people? And what harm could it possibly have done Mary to see some one wandering in the garden by Winnie's side whose presence made

the world complete, and left no more to be desired in it? or to look at poor Sir Edward talking to Aunt Agatha, who took an innocent pleasure in his talk? what harm could all this do to the ogress in the widow's cap who had come to trample on the happiness of the cottage? What pleasure could it be to her to turn the innocent old man, and the charming young one, away from the little flowery bower which they were so fond of?—for to be sure it did not occur to Winnie that Mrs. Ochterlony had nothing to do with it, and that it was of his own will and pleasure that Sir Edward had stayed away. Such were the thoughts which ran riot in the girl's mind while she stood in the moonlight at her open window. There was no balcony to go forth upon, and these were not sweet musings like Juliet's, but fiery discontented thoughts. Winnie did not mean to let her happiness slip by. She thought it was her happiness, and she was imperious and self-willed, and determined not to let her chance be stolen from her, as so many people do. As for Mary she had had her day. Let her be twenty times a widow, she had once been wooed, and had tasted all the delights of youth, and nobody had interfered with her—and Winnie too had made up her mind to have her day. Such a process of thinking could

never, as has been already said, have gone through the minds of either of the other women in the cottage; but Winnie was a girl of the nineteenth century, in which young ladies are brought up differently—and she meant to have her rights, and the day of her delight, and all the privileges of her youth, whatever anybody might say.

As for Aunt Agatha on the other side, she too was making up her mind. She would have cut herself up in little pieces to please her darling, but she could not relinquish those rules of propriety which were dearer than herself—she was making up her mind to the struggle with tears and a kind of despair. It was a heartrending prospect, and she did not know how she could live without the light of her pretty Winnie's countenance, and see her looking sulky and miserable as she had done that night. But still in consideration of what was *right*, Miss Seton felt that she must and could bear anything. To expect a family in mourning, and who had just received a widow into their house, to see visitors, was an inhuman idea; and Aunt Agatha would have felt herself deeply humiliated could she really have supposed that anybody thought her capable of such a dereliction of duty. But she cried a little as she considered the awful results

of her decision. Winnie disappointed, sullen, and wretched, roused to rebellion, and taking no pleasure in her life, was a terrible picture to contemplate. Aunt Agatha felt that all the pleasure of her own existence was over, and cried a few salt tears over the sacrifice; but she knew her duty, and at least there was, or ought to be, a certain comfort in that.

Sir Edward came next day to pay a solemn visit at the cottage, and it gave her a momentary gleam of comfort to feel that this was the course of conduct which he at least expected of her. He came, and his "young friend" came with him, and for the moment smiles and contentment came back to the household. Sir Edward entered the drawing-room and shook hands tenderly with Mrs. Ochterlony, and sat down beside her, and began to talk as only an old friend could; but the young friend stayed in the garden with Winnie, and the sound of their voices came in now and then along with the songs of the birds and the fragrance of the flowers—all nature conspiring as usual to throw a charm about the young creatures, who apart from this charm did not make the loveliest feature in the social landscape. Sir Edward, on the other hand, sat down as a man sits down in a room where there is a seat which is known as his, and

where he is in the way of doing a great deal of pleasant talk most days of his life. This was a special occasion, and he behaved himself accordingly. He patted Mary's hand softly with one of his, and held it in the other, and looked at her with that tender curiosity and inquiry which comes natural after a long absence. "She is changed, but I can see our old Mary still in her face," said the old man, patting her hand; and then he asked about the journey, and if he should see the children; and then the ordinary talk began.

"We did not come last evening, knowing you expected Mary," Sir Edward said, "and a most unpleasant companion I had all the night in consequence. Young people will be young people, you know—indeed, I never can help remembering, that just the other day I was young myself."

"Yes," said Aunt Agatha, faltering; "but you see under the circumstances, Sir Edward, Winnie could not expect that her sister——"

"Dear aunt," said Mary, "I have already begged you to make no difference for me."

"I am sure, my love, you are very kind," said Aunt Agatha; "you always were the most unselfish—— But I hope I know my duty, whatever your good heart may induce you to say."

"And *I* hope, after a while," said Sir Edward, "that Mary too will be pleased to see her friends. We are all friends here, and everybody I know will be glad to welcome her home."

Most likely it was those very words that made Mary feel faint and ill, and unable to reply. But though she did not say anything, she at least made no sort of objection to the hope; and immediately the pleasant little stream of talk gushed up and ran past her as she knew it would. The two old people talked of the two young ones who were so interesting to them, and all that was special in Sir Edward's visit came to a close.

"Young Percival is to leave me next week," Sir Edward said. "I shall miss him sadly, and I am afraid it will cost him a heartache to go."

Aunt Agatha knew so well what her friend meant that she felt herself called upon to look as if she did not know. "Ah," she said, "I don't wonder. It is not often that he will find such a friend as you have been, Sir Edward: and to leave you, who are always such pleasant company——"

"My dear Miss Seton," said Sir Edward, with a gentle laugh, "you don't suppose that I expect him to have a heartache for love of me?

He is a nice young fellow, and I am sorry to lose him; but if it were only *my* pleasant company——"

Then Aunt Agatha blushed as if it had been herself who was young Percival's attraction. "We shall all miss him, I am sure," she said. "He is so delicate and considerate. He has not come in, thinking no doubt that Mary is not equal to seeing strangers; but I am so anxious that Mary should see him—that is, I like her to know our friends," said the imprudent woman, correcting herself, and once more blushing crimson, as if young Percival had been a lover of her very own.

"He is a very nice fellow," said Sir Edward; "most people like him; but I don't know that I should have thought of describing him as considerate or delicate. Mary must not form too high an idea. He is just a young man like other young men," said the impartial baronet, and likes his own way, and is not without a proper regard for his own interest. He is not in the least a hero of romance."

"I don't think he is at all mercenary, Sir Edward, if that is what you mean," said Aunt Agatha, blushing no longer, but growing seriously red.

"Mercenary!" said Sir Edward. "I don't

think I ever dreamt of that. He is like other young men, you know. I don't want Mary to form too high an idea. But one thing I am sure of is that he is very sorry to go away."

And then a little pause happened, which was trying to Aunt Agatha, and in the interval the voices of the two young people in the garden sounded pleasantly from outside. Sitting thus within hearing of them, it was difficult to turn to any other subject; but yet Miss Seton would not confess that she could by any possibility understand what her old neighbour meant; and by way of escaping from that embarrassment plunged without thought into another in which she floundered helplessly after the first dash.

"Mary has just come from Earlston," she said. "It has grown quite a museum, do you know?—every sort of beautiful thing, and all so nicely arranged. Francis—Mr. Ochterlony," said Aunt Agatha, in confusion, had always a great deal of taste—— Perhaps you may remember——"

"Oh, yes, I remember," said Sir Edward—"such things are not easily forgotten—but I hope you don't mean to suppose that Percival——"

"I was thinking nothing about Captain Percival," Miss Seton said, feeling ready to cry—"What I meant was, I thought—I supposed you

might have some interest—I thought you might like to know——"

"Oh, if that is all," said Sir Edward, "of course I take a great interest—but I thought you meant something of the same kind might be going on here. You must never think of that. I would never forgive myself if I were twice to be the occasion——"

"I was thinking nothing about Captain Percival," said Aunt Agatha, with tears of vexation in her eyes; "nor—nor anything else—I was talking for the sake of conversation: I was thinking perhaps you might like to hear——"

"May I show you my boys, Sir Edward?" said Mary, ringing the bell—"I should like you to see them; and I am going to ask you, by-and-by, what I must do with them. My brother-in-law is very much a recluse—I should be glad to have the advice of somebody who knows more of the world."

"Ah, yes, let us see the boys," said Sir Edward. "*All* boys are they?—that's a pity. You shall have the best advice I can give you, my dear Mary—and if you are not satisfied with that, you shall have better advice than mine; there is nothing so important as education; come along, little ones. So these are all?—three—I thought you had more than three. Ah, I beg your par-

don. How do you do, my little man? I am your mamma's old friend—I knew her long before you were born—come and tell me your name."

And while Sir Edward got at these particulars, and took the baby on his knee, and made himself agreeable to the two sturdy little heroes who stood by, and stared at him, Aunt Agatha came round behind backs, and gave Mary a quiet kiss —half by way of consolation, half by way of thanks—for, but for that happy inspiration of sending for the children, there was no telling what bog of unfortunate talk Miss Seton might not have tumbled into. Sir Edward was one of those men who know much, too much, about everybody—everything, he himself thought. He could detect allusions in the most careless conversation, and never forgot anything even when it was expedient and better that it should be forgotten. He was a man who had been unlucky in his youth, and who now, in his old age, though he was as well off as a man living all alone, in forlorn celibacy, could be, was always called poor Sir Edward. The very cottagers called him so, who might well have looked upon his life as a kind of paradise; and being thus recognised as an object of pity, Sir Edward had on the whole a very pleasant life. He knew all about everybody,

and was apt at times to confuse his neighbours sadly, as he had just done Aunt Agatha, by a reference to the most private bits of their individual history; but it was never done with ill-nature—and after all there is a charm about a person who knows everything about everybody. He was a man who could have told you all about the Gretna Green marriage, which had cost poor Major Ochterlony so much trouble, as well, or perhaps even better, than if he had been present at it; and he was favourable to marriages in general, though he had never himself made the experience, and rather liked to preside over a budding inclination like that between Winifred Seton and young Percival. He took little Wilfrid on his knee when the children were thus brought upon the scene, in a fatherly, almost grand-fatherly way, and was quite ready to go into Mary's plans about them. He thought it was quite right, and the most suitable thing she could do, to settle somewhere where there was a good grammar-school; and he had already begun to calculate where the best grammar-schools were situated, and which would be the best plan for Mrs. Ochterlony, when the voices in the garden were heard approaching. Aunt Agatha had escaped from her embarrassment by going out to the young people, and was now bringing them in

to present the young man for Mary's approval and criticism. Miss Seton came first, and there was anxiety in her face; and after her Winnie stepped in at the window, with a little flush upon her pretty cheek, and an unusual light in her eye; and after her—but at that moment the whole party were startled by a sudden sound of surprise, the momentary falling back of the stranger's foot from the step, and a surprised, half-suppressed exclamation. "Oh!—Mrs. Ochterlony!" exclaimed Sir Edward's young friend. As it happened all the rest were silent at that moment, and his voice was distinctly audible, though perhaps he had not meant it to be so. He himself was half hidden by the roses which clambered all over the cottage, but Mary naturally turned round, and turned her face to the window, when she heard her own name—as indeed they all did—surprised at the exclamation, and still more at the tone. And it was thus under the steady gaze of four pairs of eyes that Captain Percival came into the room. Perhaps but for that exclamation Mary might not have recognised him; but her ear had been trained to quick understanding of that inflection, half of amusement, half of contempt, which she had not heard for so long. To her ears it meant, "Oh, Mrs. Ochterlony!—she who was married over again, as people pre-

tended—she who took in the Kirkmans, and all the people at the station." Captain Percival came in, and he felt his blood run cold as he met all those astonished eyes, and found Mary looking so intently at him. What had he done that they should all stare at him like that? for he was not so well aware of what he had given utterance to, nor of his tone in giving utterance to it, as they were. "Good heavens, what is the matter?" he said; "you all look at me as if I were a monster. Miss Seton, may I ask you to introduce me——"

"We have met before, I think," Mary said, quietly. "When I heard of Captain Percival I did not know it was the same I used to hear so much about in India. I think, when I saw you last, it was at——"

She wanted by sudden instinct to say it out and set herself right for ever and ever, here where everything about her was known; but the words seemed to choke her. In spite of herself she stopped short; how could she refer to that, the only great grievance in her life, her husband's one great wrong against her, now that he was in his grave, and she left in the world the defender and champion of all his acts and ways? She could not do it—she was obliged to stop short in the middle, and swallow the sob that would have

choked her with the next word. And they stood all gazing at her, wondering what it was.

"Yes," said the young man, with a confidential air—"I remember it very well indeed—I heard all about it from Askell, you know;—but I never imagined, when I heard you talking of your sister, that it was the same Mrs. Ochterlony," he added, turning to Winnie, who was looking on with great and sudden interest. And then there was a pause—such a pause as occurs sometimes when there is an evident want of explanation somewhere, and all present feel that they are on the borders of a mystery. Somehow it changed the character of the assembled company. A few minutes before it had been the sad stranger, in her widow's cap, who was the centre of all, whom all present paid, willingly or not, a certain homage to, and to whom the visitors had to be presented in a half apologetic way, as if to a queen. Aunt Agatha, indeed, had been quite anxious on the subject, pondering how she could best bring Sir Edward's young friend, Winnie's admirer, under Mrs. Ochterlony's observation, and have her opinion of him; and now in an instant the situation was reversed, and it was Mary and Captain Percival alone who seem to know each other, and to have recollections in common! Mary felt her cheeks flush in spite of

herself, and Winnie grew pale with incipient jealousy and dismay, and Aunt Agatha fluttered about in a state of the wildest anxiety. At last both she and Sir Edward burst out talking at the same moment, with the same visible impulse. And they brought the children into the foreground, and lured them into the utterance of much baby nonsense, and even went so far as to foster a rising quarrel between Hugh and Islay, all to cover up from each other's eyes and smother in the bud this mystery, if it was a mystery. It was a singular disturbance to bring into such a quiet house; for how could the people who dwelt at home tell what those two strangers might have known about each other in India, how they might have been connected, or what secret might lie between them?—no more than people could tell in a cosy sheltered curtained room what might be going on at sea, or even on the dark road outside. And here there was the same sense of insecurity—the same distrust and fear. Winnie stood a little apart, pale, and with her delicate curved nostril a little dilated. Captain Percival was younger than Mary, and Mary up to this moment had been hedged round with a certain sanctity, even in the eyes of her discontented young sister. But there was some intelligence between them, something known to those two

which was known to no one else in the party. This was enough to set off the thoughts of a self-willed girl, upon whose path Mary had thrown the first shadow, wildly into all kinds of suspicions. And to tell the truth, the elder people, who should have known better, were not much wiser than Winnie. Thus, while Hugh and Islay had a momentary struggle in the foreground, which called for their mother's active interference, the one ominous cloud of her existence once more floated up upon the dim firmament over Mary's head; though if she had but finished her sentence it would have been no cloud at all, and might never have come to anything there or thereafter. But this did not occur to Mrs. Ochterlony. What did occur to her in her vexation and pain was that her dead Hugh would be hardly dealt with among her kindred, if the stranger should tell her story. And she was glad, heartily glad, that there was little conversation afterwards, and that very soon the two visitors went away. But it was she who was the last to be aware that a certain doubt, a new and painful element of uncertainty stayed behind them in Aunt Agatha's pretty cottage after they were gone.

CHAPTER XVI.

THAT night was a painful night for Winnie. The girl was self-willed and self-loving, as has been said. But she was not incapable of the more generous emotions, and when she looked at her sister she could no more suspect her of any wrong or treachery than she could suspect the sun shining over their heads. And her interest in the young soldier had gone a great length. She thought he loved her, and it was very hard to think that he was kept apart from her by a reason which was no reason at all. She roved about the garden all the evening in an unsettled way, thinking he would come again—thinking he could not stay away—explaining to herself that he must come to explain. And when she glanced indoors at the lamp which was lighted so much earlier than it needed to be, for the sake of Mary's sewing, and saw Mary seated beside it,

in what looked like perfect composure and quietness, Winnie's impatience got the better of her. He was to be banished, or confined to a formal morning call, for Mary's sake, who sat there so calm, a woman for whom the fret and cares of life were over, while for Winnie life was only beginning, and her heart going out eagerly to welcome and lay claim to its troubles. And then the thought that it was the same Mrs. Ochterlony came sharp as a sting to Winnie's heart. What could he have had to do with Mrs. Ochterlony? what did *she* mean coming home in the character of a sorrowful widow, and shutting out their visitors, and yet awakening something like agitation and unquestionable recognition in the first stranger she saw? Winnie wandered through the garden, asking herself those questions, while the sweet twilight darkened, and the magical hour passed by, which had of late associated itself with so many dreams. And again he did not come. It was impossible to her, when she looked at Mary, to believe that there could be anything inexplainable in the link which connected her lover with her sister—but still he ought to have come to explain. And when Sir Edward's windows were lighted once more, and the certainty that he was not coming penetrated her mind, Winnie clenched her pretty hands, and went crazy

for the moment with despite and vexation. Another long dull weary evening, with all the expectation and hope quenched out of it; another lingering night; another day in which there was as much doubt as hope. And next week he was going away! And it was all Mary's fault, however you took it—whether she had known more of him than she would allow in India, or whether it was simply the fault of that widow's cap which scared people away? This was what was going on in Winnie's agitated mind while the evening dews fell upon the banks of Kirtell, and the soft stars came out, and the young moon rose, and everything glistened and shone with the sweetness of a summer night. This fair young creature, who was in herself the most beautiful climax of all the beauty around her, wandered among her flowers with her small hands clenched, and the spirit of a little fury in her heart. She had nothing in the world to trouble her, and yet she was very unhappy, and it was all Mary's fault. Probably if Mary could but have seen into Winnie's heart she would have thought it preferable to stay at Earlston, where the Psyche and the Venus were highly indifferent, and had no hearts, but only arms and noses that could be broken. Winnie was more fragile than the Etruscan vases

or the Henri II. porcelain. They had escaped fracture, but she had not; but fortunately this thought did not occur to Mrs. Ochterlony as she sat by the lamp working at Hugh's little blouses in Aunt Agatha's chair.

And Aunt Agatha, more actively jealous than Winnie herself, sat by knitting little socks—an occupation which she had devoted herself to, heart and soul, from the moment when she first knew the little Ochterlonys were coming home. She was knitting with the prettiest yarn and the finest needles, and had a model before her of proportions so shapely as to have filled any woman's soul with delight; but all that was eclipsed for the time by the doubt which hung over Mary, and the evident unhappiness of her favourite. Aunt Agatha was less wise than Winnie, and had not eyes to perceive that people were characteristic even in their wrong-doing, and that Captain Percival of himself could have nothing to do with the shock which Mary had evidently felt at the sight of him. Probably Miss Seton had not been above a little flirtation in her own day, and she did not see how that would come unnatural to a woman of her own flesh and blood. And she sat accordingly on the other side of the lamp and knitted, with a pucker of

anxiety upon her fair old brow, casting wistful glances now and then into the garden where Winnie was.

"And I suppose, my dear, you know Captain Percival very well?" said Aunt Agatha, with that anxious look on her face.

"I don't think I ever saw him but once," said Mary, who was a little impatient of the question.

"But once, my dear love! and yet you both were so surprised to meet," said Aunt Agatha, with reasonable surprise.

"There are some moments when to see a man is to remember him ever after," said Mary. "It was at such a time that I saw Sir Edward's friend. It would be best to tell you about it, Aunt Agatha. There was a time when my poor Hugh——"

"Oh, Mary, my darling, you can't think I want to vex you," cried Aunt Agatha, "or make you go back again upon anything that is painful. I am quite satisfied, for my part, when you say so. And so would Winnie be, I am sure."

"Satisfied?" said Mary, wondering, and yet with a smile; and then she forgot the wonder of it in the anxiety. "I should be sorry to think that Winnie cared much for anything that could be said about Captain Percival. I used to hear of him from the Askells who were friends of his.

Do not let her have anything to do with him, Aunt Agatha; I am sure he could bring her nothing but disappointment and pain."

"I—Mary?—Oh, my dear love, what can *I* do?" cried Miss Seton, in sudden confusion; and then she paused and recovered herself. "Of course if he was a wicked young man, I—I would not let Winnie have anything to do with him," she added, faltering; "but—do you think you are sure, Mary? If it should be only that you do not—like him; or that you have not got on —or something——"

"I have told you that I know nothing of him, Aunt," said Mary. "I saw him once at the most painful moment of my life, and spoke half-a-dozen words to him in my own house after that—but it is what I have heard the gentlemen say. I do not like him. I think it was unmannerly and indelicate to come to my house at such a time——"

"My darling!" said Aunt Agatha, soothing her tenderly. Miss Seton was thinking of the major's death, not of any pain that might have gone before; and Mary by this time in the throng of recollections that came upon her had forgotten that everybody did not know.

"But that is not the reason," Mrs. Ochterlony said, composing herself: "the reason is that he

could not, unless he is greatly changed, make Winnie otherwise than unhappy. I know the reputation he had. The Hesketh would not let him come to their house after Annie came out; and I have even heard Hugh——"

"My dear love, you are agitating yourself," cried Aunt Agatha. "Oh, Mary, if you only knew how anxious I am to do anything to recall——"

"Thank you," said Mrs. Ochterlony, with a faint smile: "it is not so far off that I should require anything to recall all that has happened to me—but for Winnie's sake——"

And it was just at that monent that the light suddenly appeared in Sir Edward's window, and brought Winnie in, white and passionate, with a thunder-cloud full of tears and lightnings and miserable headache and self-reproach, lowering over her brilliant eyes.

"It is very good of Mary, I am sure, to think of something for my sake," said Winnie. "What is it, Aunt Agatha? Everything is always so unpleasant that is for one's good. I should like to know what it was."

And then there was a dead silence in the pretty room. Mary bent her head over her work, silenced by the question, and Aunt Agatha, in a flutter of uncertainty and tribulation, turned

from one to the other, not knowing which side to take nor what to say.

"Mary has come among us a stranger," said Winnie, "and I suppose it is natural that she should think she knows our business better than we do. I suppose that is always how it seems to a stranger; but at the same time it is a mistake, Aunt Agatha, and I wish you would let Mary know that we are disposed to manage for ourselves. If we come to any harm it is we who will have to suffer, and not Mary," the impetuous girl cried, as she drew that unhappy embroidery frame out of its corner.

And then another pause, severe and startling, fell upon the little party. Aunt Agatha fluttered in her chair, looking from one to another, and Winnie dragged a violent needle through her canvas, and a great night moth came in and circled about them, and dashed itself madly against the globe of light on the table. As for Mary, she sat working at Hugh's little blouse, and for a long time did not speak.

"My dear love!" Aunt Agatha said at last, trembling, "you know there is nothing in the world I would not do to please you, Winnie,—nor Mary either. Oh, my dear children, there are only you two in the world. If one says anything, it is for the other's good. And here

we are, three women together, and we are all fond of each other, and surely, surely, nothing ever can make any unpleasantness!" cried the poor lady, with tears. She had her heart rent in two, like every mediatrix, and yet the larger half, as was natural, went to her darling's side.

"Winnie is right enough," Mary said, quietly. "I am a stranger, and I have no right to interfere; and very likely, even if I were permitted to interfere, it would do no good. It is a shame to vex you, Aunt Agatha. My sister must submit to hear my opinion one time, but I am not going to disturb the peace of the house, nor yours."

"Oh, Mary, my dear, it is only that she is a little impatient, and has always had her own way," said Aunt Agatha, whispering across the table. And then no more was said. Miss Seton took up her little socks, and Winnie continued to labour hotly at her embroidery, and the sound of her work, and the rustle of Mary's arm at her sewing, and the little click of Aunt Agatha's knitting-needles, and the mad dashes of the moth at the lamp, were all the sounds in the room, except, indeed, the sound of the Kirtell, flowing softly over its pebbles at the foot of the brae, and the sighing of the evening air among the trees, which were sadly contradictory of the spirit of the scene within; and at a distance over

the woods, gleamed Sir Edward's window, with the ill-disposed light which was, so to speak, the cause of all. Perhaps, after all, if Mrs. Ochterlony had stayed at Earlston, where the Psyche and the Venus were not sensitive, and there was nothing but marble and china to jar into discord, it might have been better; and what would have been better still, was the grey cottage on the roadside, with fire on the hearth and peace and freedom in the house; and it was to that, with a deep and settled longing, that Mary's heart and thoughts went always back.

When Mrs. Ochterlony had withdrawn, the scene changed much in Aunt Agatha's drawing-room. But it was still a pretty scene. Then Winnie came and poured out her girlish passion in the ears and at the feet of her tender guardian. She sank down upon the carpet, and laid her beautiful head upon Aunt Agatha's knee, and clasped her slender arms around her. "To think she should come and drive every one I care for away from the house, and set even you against me!" cried Winnie, with sobs of vexation and rage.

"Oh, Winnie! not me! Never me, my darling," cried Aunt Agatha; and they made a group which a painter would have loved, and which would have conveyed the most delicate

conception of love and grief to an admiring public, had it been painted. Nothing less than a broken heart and a blighted life would have been suggested to any innocent fancy by the abandonment of misery in Winnie's attitude. And to tell the truth, she was very unhappy, furious with Mary, and with herself, and with her lover, and everybody in the wide world. The braids of her beautiful hair got loose, and the net that confined them came off, and the glistening silken flood came tumbling about her shoulders. Miss Seton could not but take great handfuls of it as she tried to soothe her darling; and poor Aunt Agatha's heart was rent in twain as she sat with this lovely burden in her lap, thinking, Oh, if nobody had ever come to distract Winnie's heart with love-making, and bring such disturbance to her life; oh, if Hugh Ochterlony had thought better of it, and had not died! Oh, if Mary had never seen Captain Percival, or seeing him, had approved of him, and thought him of all others the mate she would choose for her sister! The reverse of all these wishes had happened, and Aunt Agatha could not but look at the combination with a certain despair.

"What can I do, my dear love?" she said. "It is my fault that Mary has come here. You know yourself it would have been unnatural if

she had gone anywhere else: and how could we go on having people, with her in such deep mourning? And as for Captain Percival, my darling——"

"I was not speaking of Captain Percival," said Winnie, with indignation. "What is he to me?—or any man? But what I will not bear is Mary interfering. She shall not tell us what we are to do. She shan't come in and look as if she understood everything better than we do. And, Aunt Agatha, she shan't—she shall never come, not for a moment, between you and me!"

"My darling child! my dear love!" cried poor Aunt Agatha, "as if that was possible, or as if poor Mary wanted to. Oh, if you would only do her justice, Winnie? She is fond of you; I know she is fond of you. And what she was saying was entirely for your good——"

"She is fond of nobody but her children," said Winnie, rising up, and gathering her bright hair back into the net. "She would not care what happened to us, as long as all was well with her tiresome little boys."

Aunt Agatha wrung her hands, as she looked in despair at the tears on the flushed cheek, and the cloud which still hung upon her child's brow. What could she say? Perhaps there was a little

truth in what Winnie said. The little boys, though Miss Seton could not help feeling them to be so unimportant in comparison with Winnie and her beginning of life, were all in all to Mrs. Ochterlony; and when she had murmured again that Mary meant it all for Winnie's good, and again been met by a scornful protestation that anything meant for one's good was highly unpleasant, Aunt Agatha was silenced, and had not another word to say. All that she could do was to pet her wilful darling more than ever, and to promise with tears that Mary should never, never make any difference between them, and that she herself would do anything that Winnie wished or wanted. The interview left her in such a state of agitation that she could not sleep, nor even lie down, till morning was breaking, and the new day had begun—but wandered about in her dressing-gown, thinking she heard Winnie move, and making pilgrimages to her room to find her, notwithstanding all her passion and tears, as fast asleep as one of Mary's boys—which was very, very different from Aunt Agatha's case, or Mary's either, for that matter. As for Mrs. Ochterlony, it is useless to enter into any description of her feelings. She went to bed with a heavy heart, feeling that she had made another failure, and glad, as people are

when they have little comfort round them, of the kind night and the possible sleep which, for a few hours at least, would make her free of all this. But she did not sleep as Winnie did, who felt herself so ill-used and injured. Thus, Mrs. Ochterlony's return, a widow, brought more painful agitation to Miss Seton's cottage than had been known under its quiet roof since the time when she went away a bride.

CHAPTER XVII.

AND after this neither Sir Edward nor his young friend appeared for two whole days. Any girl of Winifred Seton's impetuous character, who has ever been left in such a position on the very eve of the telling of that love-tale, which had been all but told for several weeks past, but now seemed suddenly and artificially arrested just at the moment of utterance—will be able to form some idea of Winnie's feelings during this dreadful interval. She heard the latch of the gate lifted a hundred times in the day, when, alas, there was no one near to lift the latch. She was afraid to go out for an instant, lest in that instant "they" should come; her brain was ringing with supposed sounds of footsteps and echoes of voices, and yet the road lay horribly calm and silent behind the garden hedge, with no passengers upon it. And these

two evenings the light came early into Sir Edward's window, and glared cruelly over the trees. And to be turned inward upon the sweet old life from which the charm had fled, and to have to content one's self with flowers and embroidery, and the canary singing, and the piano, and Aunt Agatha! Many another girl has passed through the same interval of torture, and felt the suspense to be killing, and the crisis tragic—but yet to older eyes perhaps even such a dread suspension of all the laws of being has also its comic side. Winnie, however, took care to keep anybody from laughing at it in the cottage. It was life and death to her, or at least so she thought. And her suppressed frenzy of anxiety, and doubt, and fear, were deep earnest to Aunt Agatha, who seemed now to be living her own early disappointments over again, and more bitterly than in the first version of them. She tried hard to remember the doubt thrown upon Captain Percival by Mary, and to persuade herself that this interposition was providential, and meant to save her child from an unhappy marriage. But when Miss Seton saw Winnie's tragic countenance, her belief in Providence was shaken. She could not see the good of anything that made her darling suffer. Mary might be wrong, she might be prejudiced, or have heard

a false account, and it might be simply herself who was to blame for shutting her doors, or seeming to shut her doors, against her nearest and oldest neighbours. Could it be supposed that Sir Edward would bring any one to her house who was not a fit associate or a fit suitor, if things should take such a turn, for Winnie? Under the painful light thrown upon the subject by Winnie's looks, Aunt Agatha came altogether to ignore that providential view which had comforted her at first, and was so far driven in the other direction at last as to write Sir Edward a little note, and take the responsibility upon her own shoulders. What Miss Seton wrote was, that though, in consequence of their late affliction, the family were not equal to seeing visitors in a general way, yet that it would be strange indeed if they were to consider Sir Edward a stranger, and that she hoped he would not stay away, as she was sure his company would be more a comfort to Mary than anything else. And she also hoped Captain Percival would not leave the Hall without coming to see them. It was such a note as a maiden lady was fully justified in writing to an old friend—an invitation, but yet given with a full consideration of all the proprieties, and that tender regard for Mary's feelings which Aunt Agatha had shown throughout. It was written and despatched when

Winnie had gone out, as she did on the third day, in proud defiance and desperation, so that if Sir Edward's sense of propriety and respect for Mary's cap should happen to be stronger than Aunt Agatha's, no further vexation might come to the young sufferer from this attempt to set all right.

And Winnie went out without knowing of this effort for her consolation. She went down by Kirtell, winding down the wooded banks, in the sweet light and shade of the August morning, seeing nothing of the brightness, wrapped up and absorbed in her own sensations. She felt now that the moment of fate had passed,—that moment that made or marred two lives;—and had in her heart, in an embryo unexpressed condition, several of Mr. Browning's minor poems, which were not then written; and felt a general bitterness against the world for the lost climax, the *dénouement* which had not come. She thought to herself even, that if the tale had been told, the explanation made, and something, however tragical, had happened *after*, it would not have been so hard to bear. But now it was clear to Winnie that her existence must run on soured and contracted in the shade, and that young Percival must stiffen into a worldly and miserable old bachelor, and that their joint life, the only life worth living, had been stolen from

them, and blighted in the bud. And what was it all for?—because Mary, who had had all the good things of this life, who had loved and been married in the most romantic way, and had been adored by her husband, and reigned over him, had come, so far, to an end of her career. Mary was over thirty, an age at which Winnie could not but think it must be comparatively indifferent to a woman what happened—at which the snows of age must have begun to benumb her feelings, under any circumstances, and the loss of a husband or so did not much matter; but at eighteen, and to lose the first love that had ever touched your heart! to lose it without any reason—without the satisfaction of some dreadful obstacle in the way, or misunderstanding still more dreadful; without ever having heard the magical words and tasted that first rapture!—Ah, it was hard, very hard; and no wonder that Winnie was in a turmoil of rage, and bitterness, and despair.

The fact was, that she was so absorbed in her thoughts as not to see him there where he was waiting for her. He had seen her long ago, as she came down the winding road, betraying herself at the turnings by the flutter of her light dress—for Winnie's mourning was slight—and he had waited, as glad as she could be of the opportunity, and the chance of seeing her undis-

turbed, and free from all critical eyes. There is a kind of popular idea that it is only a good man, or one with a certain "nobility" or "generosity" in his character who is capable of being in love; but the idea is not so justifiable as it would seem to be. Captain Percival was not a good young man, nor would it be safe for any conscientious historian to claim for him generous or noble qualities to any marked degree; but at the same time I am not disposed to qualify the state of his sentiments by saying, as is generally said of unsatisfactory characters, that he loved Winnie as much as he could love anything. He was in love with her, heart and soul, as much as if he had been a paladin. He would not have stayed at any obstacle, nor regarded either his own comfort or hers, or any other earthly bar between them. When Winnie thought him distant from her, and contemplating his departure, he had been haunting all the old walks which he knew Miss Seton and her niece were in the habit of taking. He was afraid of Mary—that was one thing indisputable—and he thought she would harm him, and bring up his old character against him; and felt instinctively that the harm which he thought he knew of her, could not be used against her here. And it was for this reason that he had not ventured again to

present himself at the cottage; but he had been everywhere about, wherever he thought there was any chance of meeting the lady of his thoughts. And if Winnie had not been so anxious not to miss that possible visitor; if she had been coming and going, and doing all she usually did, their meeting must have taken place two days ago, and all the agony and trouble been spared. He watched her now, and held his breath, and traced her at all the turnings of the road, now by a puff of her black and white muslin dress, and then by a long streaming ribbon catching among the branches—for Winnie was fond of long ribbons wherever she could introduce them. And she was so absorbed with her own settled anguish, that she had stepped out upon him from among the trees before she was aware.

"Captain Percival!" said Winnie, with an involuntary cry; and she felt the blood so rush to her cheeks with sudden delight and surprise, that she was in an instant put on her guard, and driven to account for it.—"I did not see there was any one here—what a fright you have given me. And we, who thought you had gone away," added Winnie, looking suddenly at him with blazing defiant eyes.

If he had not been in love, probably he would

have known what it all meant—the start, the blush, the cry, and that triumphant, indignant, reproachful, exulting look. But he had enough to do with his own sensations, which makes a wonderful difference in such a case.

"Gone away!" he said, on the spur of the moment—"as if I could go away—as if you did not know better than that."

"I was not aware that there was anything to detain you," said Winnie; and all at once from being so tragical, her natural love of mischief came back, and she felt perfectly disposed to play with her mouse. "Tell me about it. Is it Sir Edward? or perhaps you, too, have had an affliction in your family. I think that is the worst of all," she said, shaking her pretty head mournfully—and thus the two came nearer to each other and laughed together, which was as good a means of *rapprochement* as anything else.

But the young soldier had waited too long for this moment to let it all go off in laughter. "If you only knew how I have been trying to see you," he said. "I have been at the school and at the mill, and in the woods—in all your pet places. Are you condemned to stay at home because of this affliction? I could not come to the cottage because, though Miss Seton is so

kind, I am sure your sister would do me an ill turn if she could."

Winnie was startled, and even a little annoyed by this speech—for it is a fact always to be borne in mind by social critics, that one member of a family may be capable of saying everything that is unpleasant about another, without at the same time being disposed to hear even an echo of his or her own opinion from stranger lips. Winnie was of this way of thinking. She had not taken to her sister, and was quite ready herself to criticise her very severely; but when somebody else did it, the result was very different. "Why should my sister do you an ill turn?" she said.

"Oh!" said young Percival; "it is because you know she knows that I know all about it——"

"All about it!" said Winnie. She was tall already, but she grew two inches taller as she stood and expanded and looked her frightened lover into nothing. "There can be nothing about Mary, Captain Percival, which you and all the world may not know."

And then the young man saw he had made a wrong move. "I have not been haunting the road for hours to talk about Mrs. Ochterlony," he said. "She does not like me, and I am

frightened for her. Oh, Winnie, you know very well why. You know I would tremble before anybody who might make *you* think ill of me. It is cruel to pretend you don't understand."

And then he took her hand and told her everything—all that she looked for, and perhaps more than all—for there are touches of real eloquence about what a man says when he is really in love (even if he should be no great things in his own person) which transcend as much as they fall short of, the suggestions of a woman's curious fancy. She had said it for him two or three times in her own mind, and had done it far more elegantly and neatly. But still there was something about the genuine article which had not been in Winnie's imagination. There were fewer words, but there was a great deal more excitement, though it was much less cleverly expressed. And then, before they knew how, the crisis was over, the *dénouement* accomplished, and the two sitting side by side as in another world. They were sitting on the trunk of an old beech-tree, with the leaves rustling and the birds twittering over them, and Kirtell running, soft and sweet, hushed in its scanty summer whisper at their feet; all objects familiar, and well-known to them—and yet it was another

world. As for Mr. Browning's poems about the unlived life, and the hearts all shrivelled up for want of a word at the right moment, Winnie most probably would have laughed with youthful disdain had they been suggested to her now. This little world, in which the fallen beech-tree was the throne, and the fairest hopes and imaginations possible to man, crowded about the youthful sovereigns, and paid them obsequious court, was so different from the old world, where Sir Edward at the Hall, and Aunt Agatha in the Cottage, were expecting the young people, that these two, as was not unnatural, forgot all about it, and lingered together, no one interfering with them, or even knowing they were there, for long enough to fill Miss Seton's tender bosom with wild anxieties and terrors. Winnie had not reached home at the early dinner-hour—a thing which was to Aunt Agatha as if the sun had declined to rise, or the earth (to speak more correctly) refused to perform her proper revolutions. She became so restless, and anxious, and unhappy, that Mary, too, was roused into uneasiness. "It must be only that she is detained somewhere," said Mrs. Ochterlony. "She never would allow herself to be detained," cried Aunt Agatha, "and oh, Mary, my darling is unhappy. How can I tell what may have happened?" Thus some

people made themselves very wretched about her, while Winnie sat in perfect blessedness, uttering and listening to all manner of heavenly nonsense on the trunk of the fallen tree.

Aunt Agatha's wretchedness, however, dispersed into thin air the moment she saw Winnie come in at the garden-gate, with Captain Percival in close attendance. Then Miss Seton, with natural penetration, saw in an instant what had happened; felt that it was all natural, and wondered why she had not foreseen this inevitable occurrence. "I might have known," she said to Mary, who was the only member of the party upon whom this wonderful event had no enlivening effect; and then Aunt Agatha recollected herself, and put on her sad face, and faltered an apology. "Oh, my dear love, I know it must be hard upon you to see it," she said, apologizing as it were to the widow for the presence of joy.

"I would be a poor soul indeed, if it was hard upon me to see it," said Mary. "No, Aunt Agatha, I hope I am not so shabby as that. I have had my day. If I look grave, it is for other reasons. I was not thinking of myself."

"My love! you were always so unselfish," said Miss Seton. "Are you really anxious about *him?* See how happy he looks—he cannot be

so fond of her as that, and so happy, and yet a deceiver. It is not possible, Mary."

This was in the afternoon, when they had come out to the lawn with their work, and the two lovers were still together—not staying in one place, as their elders did, but flitting across the line of vision now and then, and, as it were, pervading the atmosphere with a certain flavour of romance and happiness.

"I did not say he was a deceiver—he dared not be a deceiver to Winnie," said Mrs. Ochterlony; "there may be other sins than that."

"Oh, Mary, don't speak as if you thought it would turn out badly," cried Aunt Agatha, clasping her hands; and she looked into Mrs. Ochterlony's face as if somehow she had the power by retracting her opinion to prevent things from turning out badly. Mary was not a stoic, nor above the sway of all the influences around her. She could not resist the soft pleading eyes that looked into her face, nor the fascination of her young sister's happiness. She held her peace, and even did her best to smile upon the spectacle, and to hope in her heart that true love might work magically upon the man who had now, beyond redemption, Winnie's future in his hands. For her own part, she shrank from him

with a vague sense of alarm and danger; and had it been possible to do any good by it, would have felt herself capable of any exertion to cast the intruder out. But it was evident that under present circumstances there was no good to be done. She kept her boys out of his way with an instinctive dread which she could not explain to herself, and shuddered when poor Aunt Agatha, hoping to conciliate all parties, set little Wilfrid for a moment on their visitor's knee, and with a wistful wile reminded him of the new family relationships Winnie would bring him. Mary took her child away with a shivering sense of peril which was utterly unreasonable. Why had it been Wilfrid of all others who was brought thus into the foreground? Why should it be he who was selected as a symbol of the links of the future? Wilfrid was but an infant, and derived no further impression from his momentary perch upon Captain Percival's knee, than that of special curiosity touching the beard which was a new kind of ornament to the fatherless baby, and tempting for closer investigation; but his mother took him away, and carried him indoors, and disposed of him carefully in the room which Miss Seton had made into a nursery, with an anxious tremor which was utterly absurd and

out of all reason. But though instinct acted upon her to this extent, she made no further attempt to warn Winnie or hinder the course of events which had gone too fast for her. Winnie would not have accepted any warning—she would have scorned the most trustworthy advice, and repulsed even the most just and right interference—and so would Mary have done in Hugh Ochterlony's case, when she was Winnie's age. Thus her mouth was shut, and she could say nothing. She watched the two with a pathetic sense of impotence as they went and came, thinking, oh, if she could but make him what Hugh Ochterlony was; and yet the Major had been far, very far from perfect, as the readers of this history are aware. When Captain Percival went away, the ladies were still in the garden; for it was necessary that the young man should go home to the Hall to join Sir Edward at dinner, and tell his story. Winnie, a changed creature, stood at the garden-gate, leaning upon the low wall, and watched him till he was out of sight; and her aunt and her sister looked at her, each with a certain pathos in her face. They were both women of experience in their different ways, and there could not but be something pathetic to them in the sight of the young creature at the height of her happiness, all-

confident and fearing no evil. It came as natural to them to think of the shadows that *must*, even under the happiest conditions, come over that first incredible brightness, as it was to her to feel that every harm and fear was over, and that now nothing could touch or injure her more. Winnie turned sharp round when her lover disappeared, and caught Mary's eye, and its wistful expression, and blazed up at once into momentary indignation, which, however, was softened by the contempt of youth for all judgment other than its own, and by the kindly influence of her great happiness. She turned round upon her sister, sudden and sharp as some winged creature, and set her all at once on her defence.

"You do not like him," she said, "but you need not say anything, Mary. It does not matter what you say. You had your day, and would not put up with any interference —and I know him a hundred—a thousand times better than you can do; and it is my day now."

"Yes," said Mary. "I did not mean to say anything. I do not like him, and I think I have reason; but Winnie, dear, I would give anything in the world to believe that you know best now."

"Oh, yes, I know best," said Winnie, with

a soft laugh; "and you will soon find out what mistakes people make who pretend to know—for I am sure he thinks there could be something said, on the other side, about you."

"About me," said Mary—and though she did not show it, but stood before her sister like a stately tower firm on its foundation, she was aware of a thrill of nervous trembling that ran through her limbs, and took the strength out of them. "What did he say about me?"

"He seemed to think there was something that might be said," said Winnie, lightly. "He was afraid of you. He said you knew that he knew all about you; see what foolish ideas people take up! and I said," Winnie went on, drawing herself up tall and straight by her stately sister's side, with that superb assumption of dignity which is fair to see at her age, "that there never could be anything about you that he and all the world might not know!"

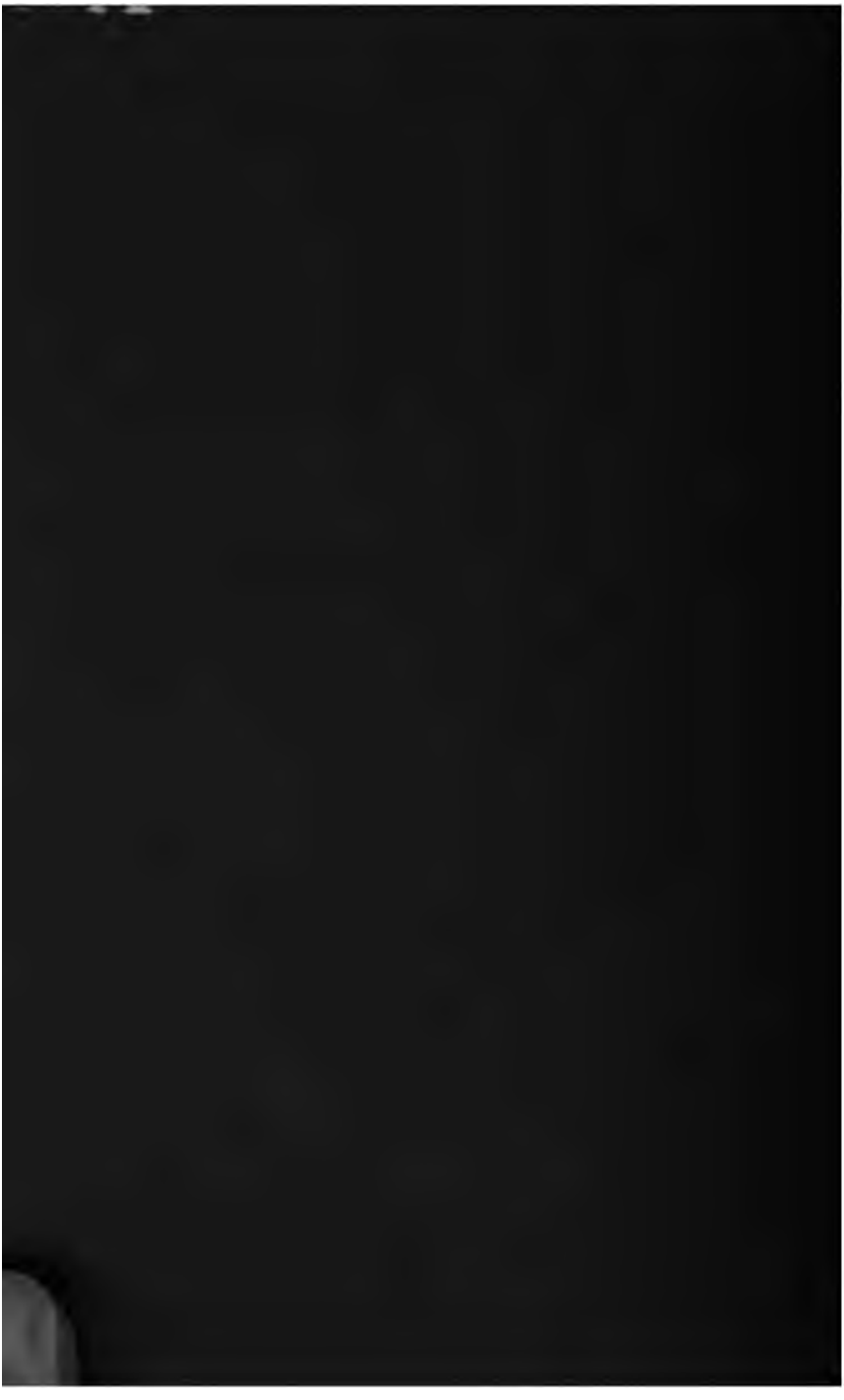
Mary put out her hand, looking stately and firm as she did so—but in truth it was done half groping, out of a sudden mist that had come up about her. "Thank you, Winnie," she said, with a smile that had anguish in it; and Winnie

with a sudden tender impulse out of her own happiness, feeling for the first time the contrast, looked at Mary's black dress beside her own light one, and at Mary's hair as bright as her own, which was put away beneath that cap which she had so often mocked at, and threw her arms round her sister with a sudden thrill of compassion and tenderness unlike anything she had ever felt before.

"Oh, Mary, dear!" she cried, "does it seem heartless to be so happy and yet to know that you——"

"No," said Mary, steadily—taking the girl; who was as passionate in her repentance as in her rebellion, to her own bosom. "No, Winnie; no, my darling—I am not such a poor soul as that. I have had my day."

And it was thus that the cloud rolled off, or seemed to roll off, and that even in the midst of that sharp reminder of the pain which life might still have in store for her, the touch of nature came to heal and help. The enemy who knew all about it might have come in bringing with him sickening suggestions of horrible harm and mischief; but anything he could do would be in vain here, where everybody knew more about her still; and to have gained as she thought her

little sister's heart, was a wonderful solace and consolation. Thus Mary's faith was revived again at the moment when it was most sorely shaken, and she began to feel, with a grateful sense of peace and security, the comfort of being, as Aunt Agatha said, among her own friends.

END OF THE FIRST VOLUME